



## Left Right, Left Right

**B**efore the British Schools began its migration to its current campus in Carrasco in 1958, it had been ensconced in the same premises in Pocitos since 1926. I was enrolled in kindergarten there in 1950 and remember it as a large, two-story building on a quiet residential street. There was an open-air, paved playground around the back with a high, red brick wall surrounding the perimeter and another, lower one that separated the boys from the girls. In my memory, the playground was huge.

We were mostly left to our own devices during breaks. There were no swings or slides or merry-go-rounds; we were expected to entertain ourselves. Which we did quite successfully, as I recall. The girls played jacks and hopscotch and skipping games. The boys played marbles and spun tops, down on our knees on the dusty cement floor, or exchanged the collectible cards that came in little chocolate bars. The boys also played spontaneous, informal, chaotic soccer games. A ragged old tennis ball would appear from somewhere and there'd be much shouting and jostling. Somehow (I'm not sure how), players took sides and soon there'd be two teams of about twenty-odd boys each trying to gain control of the ball and score. There was no referee, and the noise was deafening.

But the most exciting thing we did in the playground was the marching, a morning exercise designed to keep us fit and disciplined. Senior prefects ran the drill: girls in their playground and boys in ours. The prefects were trained by Mr. Ogsten, who had arrived at the school in 1930 at the age of twenty-four and remained there for 47 years. William Leslie Ogsten (M.A., Aberdeen University), affectionately known as "Oggie," was passionate about sports and had been Captain of his university's cross-country team. He was a stickler for discipline and the prefects learned to take their role as trainers very seriously.

When told to fall in we lined up in rows, by height, to

form a squad, and started marching in place, left right, left right. Actually, stamping in place, as we stomped our feet enthusiastically until we were immersed in a cloud of dust. All in our uniforms: boys in grey flannel suits, girls in green tunics. The prefects shouted instructions and we moved as one single body. When birds do this, it is called a murmuration. We advanced slowly, still stomping our feet, and then, at the command, eased into a march, keeping in step and swinging our arms in perfect sync. As we reached the end of the playground, we were given the order to slow down and mark time. Then, and I always found this part especially thrilling, we were instructed to wheel about, and the boys on the far end of each row would stomp in place as the rest of the squad gracefully spun on that axis until everyone had completed the turn. Then we'd be off again, legs kicking forwards, arms swinging, marching back down to the other end of the playground, where we'd repeat those precision turns in readiness for another go.

There was no doubt some physical benefit to this sort of activity, and there certainly was a lesson in teamwork and discipline. But it was my first exposure to the concept of being part of something much larger than myself and I loved it for that reason. I had my family, of course, and I had a group of friends. And the school as a whole was an entity to which I belonged. But the drill squad was something quite different. Standing shoulder-to-shoulder with a few dozen boys and marching with them in perfect unison, every move synchronized and replicated in every row, gave me a sense of belonging and a thrill I hadn't experienced anywhere else at that point. I assume that serving in the military can inspire similar feelings, but I have never been involved in anything like that. My sole experience of this sort of thing was marching at school in the mornings, and I remember it to this day with a catch in my throat as I picture the squad wheeling about and marching across the playground in tight formation, left right, left right, left right.