

THE MIND OF THE GENERAL

BY E. L. M. BURNS

He has no real work to keep him from going mad, except housemaid's work; all the rest is forced exercise, in the form of endless rehearsals for a destructive and terrifying performance which never comes off, and which, if it does come off, is not like the rehearsals.

—Bernard Shaw

IT is impossible to deny the essential truth of this pronouncement on the peacetime activities of the soldier. In this article, I propose, firstly, to inquire why soldiers are inevitably demoralized in peace, and secondly to suggest a means for avoiding this demoralization for some of them.

In theory, the soldier, when war is not actually raging, should be preparing himself for it. The first difficulty arises when he asks his political masters what war he should prepare for. He cannot make any rational plans for the defeat of his country's enemies until he knows who those enemies will be, what their resources are, and what they are likely to do. On the Continent of Europe the desired information is usually readily forthcoming, but in the great Anglo-Saxon Empires, it is not, for these Powers, as everyone knows, never engage in a war of aggression, but keep up their armaments only to preserve their incomparable institutions and rightful possessions against the assaults of an envious world. In theory, they will attack nobody, but other wicked nations may attack them. An element of vagueness is thus injected into all the ideas on war of the American or British soldier, and he has a tendency to devote himself to windy theorizing or to an old-maidish attention to *minutiae* instead of to a realistic examination of concrete problems.

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However, even if he does not know definitely who his enemy is to be, the soldier is not precluded from the study of strategy, though he must waste a lot of time planning for wars which will never happen. The industrious map-and-statistic hounds of the General Staffs can plot out plans of campaign against every conceivable enemy or coalition of enemies. But this is only the beginning of the soldier's problem, for no one has the hardihood to claim that any plan of campaign will bring a certain victory. The first clash of arms may alter everything, and the finest strategical combinations, unless they are accompanied by tactical victory, will achieve nothing.

How can the tactical victory be obtained? By properly training the troops in accordance with a sound tactical doctrine, and providing them with the most effective armament available. But money for armaments is scarce, and the soldier can seldom get the kind he wants unless he can demonstrate that a probable enemy is ahead of his own army in equipment. Thus, if he doesn't know whom he is to be called on to fight, he won't know what weapons his army should have.

Suppose, however, that all his reasonable requests in the matter of armament have been met. There is still the problem of tactical doctrine. Tactics is dependent on the effect of weapons, and the effect of a weapon can only be proved in battle. All tactical doctrine which takes account of the effect of unproved weapons, or of the use of proved weapons on a greater scale than in the past, must be largely guess work, and it is about ten to one that it will be errone-

ous if it has been evolved more than ten years after the army has had war experience. This is the soldier's second and greater difficulty.

The Great War provided a brilliant example of the inability of soldiers to foresee the effect of weapons. The deadlock on the West Front ensued because of the tremendous power of the defensive, when organized properly with machine-guns and wire obstacles. The military history of 1914-18 is that of a series of experiments in tactics intended to overcome this preponderance of the defensive. No high commander could solve the problem until many methods had been tried and failed, with a heavy price in blood paid for each trial. Probably the worst and bloodiest failure was that of Foch, at the Lorette and Vimy Ridges in 1915. It is also reported that some years before the war he attended a demonstration of airplanes, put on for the French army authorities. When it was over, he remarked to a companion that no doubt aviation was all very well as a sport, but that for war purposes it was not worth considering. So much for the tactical prescience of the soldier who came out of the war with the highest reputation!

II

Having discussed the chief difficulties which beset the soldier if he tries to prepare for war in any rational manner, let us consider the training he actually receives for grappling with these difficulties. I pass over the period he spends in military academies before being commissioned, for he rarely learns anything there that he will remember, outside of habits of discipline.

The junior officer in peace time must perfect himself and practise his men in the drill of his particular arm of the service. These drills were originally designed as the most efficient means of changing formations on the field of battle—from march formations into fighting order, and so on. Now, when men no longer fight shoulder to shoulder, new drills for the battlefield

have had to be devised, but still the old drill persists on the barrack square. In a regrettable number of cases more pains are taken in training the men in empty ceremonial than in the actual business of fighting. The close-order drill of a unit is supposed to be a sure indication of its discipline, and any colonel who neglected it would be in danger of having his command adversely reported on by the next general officer inspecting. Comparatively few officers make anything properly describable as a fetish of close-order drill, but most of them have to waste a great deal of time on it.

Administration preëmpts a good third of the officer's working hours. He must discipline his men, see that they wash their necks and shine their shoes, and make sure that their equipment is complete and serviceable and that they are properly housed, fed, and have suitable recreation. In the British Army he must conduct them to church on Sundays, and the American officer is likewise charged with a certain supervision of his subordinates' morals and spiritual welfare.

There are a thousand other small details to be attended to. The business might be expected to develop foresight and initiative, but it can only do so to a limited extent. The reason for this is that every officer has some immediate superior who must be consulted before anything at all novel is undertaken. He is under the guidance not only of his watchful superior, but also of dozens of books full of regulations, supplemented by innumerable circular letters and general orders from all military hierarchs and cabals.

The military ideal is to have everything uniform, and to have a regulation covering every imaginable contingency—to describe minutely not only what must *not* be done, but also what *is* to be done and how to do it. The disastrous results to initiative can be easily seen. Most officers grow to have a horror of administration, which means to them paper work. A few, of course, who have a formal and legalistic tendency, take

to it with delight, and become expert obstructionists and buck-passers—professors of red-tape. Once war breaks out, ninety per cent of the regulations so important in peace are thrown into the waste-paper basket, but their evil effect on the intelligence of the officer persists.

Another large slice of his time is taken up in teaching, of one kind and another. I believe that this is especially true in the United States Army today: complaints are made that the regular army is so busy training the National Guard and Reserve Forces that it cannot find time to train itself. The blighting effect of a prolonged pedagogical career on the intelligence of any except extraordinary persons is a matter of common knowledge. A short spell of teaching probably is of benefit, for the teacher has to learn his subject. But what does the officer have to teach? The doctrines discussed in the first part of this article, which, it was found, are in all probability nonsense. If he is kept at it too long, these doctrines will be so ground into him that he will be incapable of regarding them critically, that is to say, incapable of military thought. When a new problem presents itself, he will not try to solve it by common sense, conditioned by his experience, but will rack his brain for regulations and precedents.

It will be generally admitted that these activities are little suited for the development of military genius, but still the officer can study privately, and moreover a great number of schools have been established for the inculcation of the military art in all its branches, from grand strategy down to army cooking and horse-shoeing. With the middle grades of these institutions—the Service Schools of Infantry, Cavalry, Artillery, etc.—we are not concerned here; they merely teach the technique of the arms or the application of the tactical doctrine (of dubious value) discussed above. We may, however, inquire into what the student at the central War College learns, and consider whether it will make him better fitted to command troops.

The student has to devote much of his time to the study of military history. Nearly every great commander who has been asked for a recipe for success in war has said that the secret lies in reading of and pondering on the campaigns of the great captains. Napoleon's dictum in this sense is often quoted by generals when they lecture to juniors. But the French general, Colin, who has been at considerable pains to investigate the military education of Napoleon, has come to the conclusion that his reading in military history was very superficial! Probably, if the truth were known, the other great ones who claim to have learnt their art by reading military history spent less time at it than many a soldier who has ended his career as a half-pay major.

My private idea is that if the great commanders did gain any benefit from their perusal of the accounts of the stratagems and assaults of Hannibal, Turenne, Frederick the Great *et al.*, their doing so is just as much a proof of their genius as is their winning of battles. Most military history is intolerably dull and badly written, and the universally applicable lessons to be deduced from it can be written down on a page of foolscap, and have been enumerated by military writers time and again. I do not say that reading military history is entirely without value, but much study of it can never turn a soldier into a Napoleon, though it may possibly turn him into a military historian.

Another means adopted for training commanders and staffs is to carry out exercises, either on maps, or on the ground, without troops. These depend for their value on the imagination of the directors and participants. Unless they are able to imagine accurately what the conditions of war will be, the exercise will be of little use. The rules of the game are the articles of military doctrine of the army, and if that doctrine is not sound, the exercise may be worse than useless. The same applies to manœuvres with troops—the purpose of which is said to be to prevent

generals from becoming stupid. How futile manœuvres can be if the underlying doctrine is faulty is illustrated by the pre-1914 French Army.

For some years before the war, in accordance with offensive *à outrance* notions, the commanders at the grand manœuvres were urged to display *cran* and yet more *cran*. This quality is the same that a football coach refers to when he speaks of pep and guts. It finally came to the point that the French general commanding on manœuvres who did not rush bald-headed for the enemy, whatever the situation might be, was in danger of losing his job. The fruits of this training were the Battles of the Frontier, where in a week the French Army had such losses, particularly among its regimental officers, that it never really recovered from them.

III

War games are perhaps the best training available for commanders on account of the element of competition involved, but they have their limitations, which are recognized, and it is customary to conclude them when the opposing forces have come into contact—when tactical action begins. General von Hoffman remarks that he had often taken part in war games based on the invasion of East Prussia by the Russians, and that the opening moves for the Tannenberg battle were taken in accordance with the lessons learned in them, but that the magnitude of the victory was really due to the incompetence of Samsonoff and Rennenkampff, and the general inefficiency of the Russian staff and signal services. In the war game the Germans can hardly have calculated that they would be presented with the dispositions and plans of the Russians, through their being sent out in clear language on the wireless!

The best that higher military education can do, given the best material available, is to turn out efficient staff officers. The function of the staff officer is to translate or assist in translating the conceptions of

his commander into action, by means of orders, instructions and supervision. Staff officers can be trained, and are trained, but there is no means known at present to armies to develop commanders—men with the type of mind which can evolve original conceptions and combinations, and penetrate the enemy's designs. In fact, the conditions of military service are all against the development of this type of mind.

The commanders in an army in peace time are nearly all old men, and old men, though they may have wisdom, lack mental agility. No other system than promotion by seniority, with a certain amount of weeding out of incompetents, is possible. Promotion by selection would soon degenerate into promotion by favoritism, with political influence, cliques within the army, injustices, rivalries and jealousies undermining the morale of the force. Soldiers, particularly those under forty, recognize the evils which the holding of command by men past their prime entails, but so far no practicable way to avoid it has ever been found.

General Hunter Liggett observed in an article recently that it is a very bad thing for a general officer to be fat—especially if the fat is above the collar. Alas, the avoidance of mental fat is likely to be far harder for him than the keeping of his weight within limits! He has been exposed for maybe thirty years to the intelligence-atrophying effects of routine administration without responsibility, of pedagogy, of the repetition of dogmas, and of a training for war which is probably entirely out of touch with the reality of war. He is not permitted to express political opinions audibly, or even vent opinions on the state of the forces for which he is partly responsible, if they conflict with those of higher authority. Again quoting from Bernard Shaw,

Soldiers pay the penalty of their slavery and outlawry by becoming, relatively to free civilians, destructive, cruel, dishonest, tyrannical, hysterical, mendacious, alarmists at home and terrorists abroad, politically reactionary and professionally incapable.

If the last accusation were not true, the others would not matter so much. The public hires a captain of bravos to direct whatever wholesale slaughter is necessary to preserve the homes of the nation in security and prosperity, so that the young generation may therein be taught the Be-attitudes. It has a right to be indignant if he proves incapable of the task.

If professional soldiers, who have been with the colors and studied their profession for twenty to thirty years will not be likely to make good commanders of the nation's armies, where are leaders to be found? Should amateurs be drafted for the posts of commanders-in-chief? Mr. Winston Churchill is credited with having proposed that he should be entrusted with the command of the British armies in France in 1916, but he found no seconder for his motion. It has also been hinted that Mr. Roosevelt aspired to high military command when the United States entered the war. The reasons why such appointments are unlikely to be made is probably because the politicians, though they may be skeptical of the ability of the professional soldiers, would be afraid to sanction such an unheard of experiment as putting a civilian at the head of the nation's forces. If his command resulted in disaster, the politicians who had appointed him would be hanged, and if he succeeded, he would become such a national hero that he would eclipse all politicians, and probably grab power at the conclusion of the war.

Even if an amateur were appointed, he would not be likely to achieve anything very brilliant, because he would not have that knowledge of the capabilities of his instrument which is the foundation of all military combinations. An army is such a complicated machine nowadays that several years' study and experience are necessary to give anyone a sound working knowledge of its component parts and their functions—how it fights and moves, and how food, munitions and its other multitudinous requirements are provided.

IV

With the professional soldier and the amateur ruled out as possible commanders, who is left?

To answer this question let us consider the careers of some immensely successful soldiers, admittedly masters of their trade. Passing over those who from earliest manhood spent the most of their lives in war, which is the best preparation of all for command, we find another group who have had active service early in their lives, then spent a period where they were chiefly concerned with other matters than military, and again returned to war, to achieve great success.

In this group we find Washington, who after the French Wars was for fifteen years occupied with politics and the administration of his estates; Stonewall Jackson, who after the Mexican War taught elementary mechanics (in a Military Institute it is true) and also a Negro Sunday-school; Sherman, who went into banking and other business ventures and studied law; McClellan, who, after the Mexican War, was engaged in important surveying and railway work, interrupted by a military mission to the Crimea, and finally resigned to become president of the Illinois Central Railway; and Grant, who found peace time soldiering so intolerable that he resigned and took up the dreadful occupation of husbandry. Lee, while he did not resign from the army, was employed on the construction of coastal fortifications and as superintendent of West Point—jobs which can hardly be described as soldiering, pure and simple.

More modern illustrations are provided by Sir H. A. Lawrence, who, after a period of soldiering, was engaged in finance, and ended the Great War as Chief of Staff to Sir Douglas Haig, and Currie and Monash, militiamen before the war, and at its end commanders of the Canadian and Australian Corps respectively—the two most powerful fighting organizations in the British forces.

The careers of these men suggest a method for preventing promising military brains from decaying or ossifying. In the words of Stonewall Jackson,

A man who has turned, with a good military reputation, to pursuits of a semi-civilian character . . . would have more chance of success in war than those who had remained in the treadmill of the garrison.

Let promising officers of about ten years' service, who have shown themselves capable in their military duties and who have original and active minds, be kicked out of the army on half-pay. Jobs might be found for them with patriotic bankers, bond houses and industrial corporations, or they might even go into politics. If they were any good, they would probably prosper in these employments, and be far happier than they would be in the restricted sphere of military employment. (Every intelligent soldier in peace time spends many black hours pondering on the uselessness of his life.) If they found they could not succeed, they could be taken back into the army.

They would keep their places in the army seniority rolls, receiving promotion in their turn, and would return for refresher courses of about a fortnight every year or so, in which their military knowledge would be brought up to date. In the event of war breaking out, they would be allotted commands where they could exercise their talents—say a brigade or a

division for those who had attained the rank of major or lieutenant-colonel. The success which they had attained in civil life would determine the importance of the command they would be given. They would be supported by the best procurable staff officers, who would do the devilling for them. Their future would be in their own hands then. Reading the accounts of the history of the A. E. F., one is impressed by the rapid promotion of officers who proved their competence—brigadiers and generals of divisions who rose to command of armies in less than a year, while bunglers and slowpokes were sacked with admirable despatch. It is to be hoped, for the glory of American arms, that such a practice will obtain in future.

By the adoption of this scheme, there would be provided a supply of commanders who would have a good grounding in military knowledge, a background of other activities to free them from dogmatism and prejudice, and fresh and active minds to bring to the solution of the problems of command. Also, an army which would overwhelmingly be made up of hastily trained civilians would probably have more confidence in leaders who were known to be successful in civil life.

The plan is commended to *militaires* and other patriots who are concerned with the defence of their land. But simple and reasonable as it is, I am afraid there is small chance of its being adopted.

THE WALRUS OF MORON-LAND

BY LOUIS SHERWIN

I can but wonder what will become of the *Times* editor when the breath leaves his feculent body and death stops the rattling of his abortive brain, for he is unfit for Heaven and too foul for Hell. He cannot be buried in the earth lest he provoke a pestilence, nor in the sea lest he poison the fish, nor in space like Mahomet's coffin lest the circling worlds, in trying to avoid contamination, crash together, wreck the universe, and bring again the noisome reign of Chaos and old Night. The damrascal seems to be a white elephant on the hands of the Deity, and I have some curiosity to know what He will do with it.

Thus spake Brann the Iconoclast: the object of his philippic was the late General Harrison Gray Otis, editor-in-chief, sole proprietor, and guiding genius of the celebrated and incomparable Los Angeles *Times*.

In these later days you never hear him mentioned in the same breath with William R. Nelson, Henry Watterson, Charles A. Dana or Edward P. Mitchell. They contrived to be great editors without ever ceasing to be men of letters and gentlemen. But Otis began and ended his stormy career with the literary standards of an Ohio country printer and never suffered the taboos of the gentleman cult to cramp either his diction or his conduct. Yet the fearsome thing he created is alive today, and full of vigor, while the work of his great contemporaries is a legend and a memory to mock all newspaper men who respect their craft.

He took hold of the Los Angeles *Times*, now so rich, when it was a practically bankrupt sheet in a still impecunious, charming and hedonistic little town. He built the paper up into the largest in the world—and perhaps the stupidest. He boosted his town into one of the most prosperous in the hemisphere—and the

most ignoble. He became the most feared and hated man in Southern California, and he died without a real friend on earth outside his own family.

To America at large it required a dynamite explosion to make him known, and even so, the exploit of the McNamaras has been long since forgotten by most people. Nevertheless, this alumnus of an Ohio backwoods printery, who never became emancipated from its standards, stood out savagely and effectively against that stream of democratic bilge to which all his betters succumbed poltroonishly or at best with feeble protests.

Unionism in all its forms, the direct primary, the initiative, the referendum, the recall, Prohibition—all the nostrums and puerilities that plague us today were blown out of his bailiwick by his gales of scorn and invective as long as he lived. He had more courage than all the other newspaper men of America put together. Every publisher, every editor, every writer, every reader, whether of books, magazines or dailies, is worse off today because there was only one Harrison Gray Otis, and he was hidden in that brain-forsaken blight of a town where no civilized person wants to remain.

He tackled the most formidable enemy that anybody in the craft can pick—the union. And he won every fight. He kicked the labor boys out of his own plant and saved all of Southern California for the open shop and the Doheny idealism. He did not confine his scrapping to the printers; he took them all on, and beat them so badly that finally they tried to blow him to Jchovah, him and his plant.