

WAR SYMPOSIUM—III

OURS NOT TO REASON WHY

By A PRIVATE

CIVVY STREET

IN the Condemned Row the greatest breach of taste is to protest innocence. Moral questions are meaningless after the verdict. In the ante-chamber of death there is only one hope for innocent and guilty alike—Reprieve.

The change from civilian to Army life is almost as great. For the civilian there exists a complex of moral and political motives. Am I a coward? Am I right to seek exemption? How best can I serve my country, class, family or self? The civilian is an agent.

Strip off that mufti; put on the battle dress; make the agent a mere executant; and all these problems vanish, like cobwebs in candleflame. Conscript or volunteer, it makes no difference. The fish is hooked and struggles to get away.

It is not just mufti that we put off and pack in our bags to take home on our first leave: it is a hundred things, which civilians do not treasure because they take them for granted. Career, for example. I do not mean only the young architect or sculptor, taken from the work to which he has devoted years of thought, at the moment when he is beginning to find himself. I mean also the careers of the lorry-drivers and clerks and commercial travellers and bricklayers, personally as important as an artist's life work. Few civilians realize how much the casual contacts of their daily life mean to them: the friendship with the paper boy outside the suburban station, the waitress in the café, the regulars in the local pub. They make a social landscape in which the humblest civilian can freely move, an individual, sketched by his clothes, possessions and habits.

The same man, conscripted, is a number, two identification discs on a string round the neck, a uniform, and a military haircut. His dress, his feet, his hair, his face and his penis are inspected by authority. His standard of living is reduced, and what is even more important psychologically, his spending power is curtailed. Liberty of action is replaced by the authoritarianism of the detail

board. He cannot go where he wishes in his free time without a pass. He has to obey all orders he receives, even if they are foolish or unjust. (He may complain afterwards.) Initiative and will power, exercise of which gave him his greatest pleasure in life, now reside in higher authority. He is parted from his family, and stripped of his responsibilities. Civilians sometimes envy soldiers because they are assured of food, a small wage, rent and clothing. But there are few soldiers who would not surrender that meagre security in return for the demands which civilian life places on their resourcefulness.

In peace time the Army recruited men from those who had failed in civilian life, the bankrupts, love-lorn and misfits. The intelligence quotient of these recruits was not high, and rigid discipline was necessary to extort from them the unquestioning obedience on which the morale of a mercenary army is based.

We conscripts, however, had most of us succeeded in adjusting ourselves to civilian life. We held our jobs because we were good at them. We made our way in the world because we could think for ourselves. Our employers appreciated the fact that we could form our own judgements, instead of having to run to them for advice. We were paid for intelligence, not blind obedience.

We realize that fighting is a new job for us and, to start with, most of us are quite eager to learn. But we expect to be taught fighting as we were taught other trades, not as we were taught the Creed. As we are fighting for Democracy, we expect to be treated, not necessarily as equals but as thinking human beings. The military way of saying something is, 'You will do this'. We prefer the civilian way, 'You will do this, because. . . .'

We were everything under the sun in Civvy Street, dustmen, actors, scammell drivers, chartered accountants, shopkeepers. But it is amazing the unity which we develop, subjected to the same treatment. The Army tries to turn us into professional soldiers; but the formulæ based on training failures as mercenaries fail with us. Potentially we can be finer soldiers than the regulars; but only if methods are devised to use our full powers, our initiative, invention, resourcefulness. To the regular there may be comfort in the attitude, *Theirs not to reason why, theirs but to do and die*. But the reason why is very important to us, if we have to do and die.

The attempt to train responsible citizens as obedient mercenaries produces a state of mind which is either incomprehensible or

appalling to many civilians. On the one hand, the return to Civvy Street becomes the common dream: to get back into mufti at almost at any cost. You should see our envy for the man with hammer toes, or flat feet, our admiration and good wishes to the chap trying to work his discharge by aggravating his duodenal ulcers. You should see the rapture with which a conscript goes back to work with the A.F.S. or the demolition squads. Of course, it is back to the wife and the children, better wages, freedom of movement. But it is, also, back to a life of individual responsibility, a man whose name is more important than his registration number and whose thoughts can find expression in his work.

On the other hand, we accept the military position. If it is not ours to reason why, we shall refuse to reason why. We shall leave the head and heart aches of the war to our superiors. We shall be utterly irresponsible, doing exactly what we are told, no more, and, if possible, less. We shall augment our wages whatever ways we can, like true mercenaries, fighting because we are paid and are jailed if we desert. It is not *our* war; but *their* war, 'they' being vaguely our officers with cars and cultured accents, the politicians and the big business men, the people who write the tripe about us that we read in daily newspapers.

One day 'they' will decide not to have a war any longer; some think it will be next month, others in 1950. But all wars must end sometime. Then we shall go back to Civvy Street, that spacious boulevard which our thoughts fill with benign sunlight. With what nostalgia we talk of Civvy Street, the lore of our trade, the names of roads in London suburbs, pubs we frequented, pigeons we bred for racing! So Adam and Eve must have talked of Eden, after the expulsion. Our faces lighten and our voices grow vivid in the recollection of the past. But when we talk of the future, after the war is over, our joy is suddenly shot with anxiety, the sort of terror the first couple would have felt, if God had told them they could return to the Garden.

BEHIND THEM BLOODY GATES

Camps are usually surrounded with barbed wire and entered through guarded gates. Their encirclement is a necessary precaution against sabotage, Fifth Columnists, nosey parkers and nuns with sub-machine-guns up their skirts.

But to the soldier living behind the gates this purpose is often obscured by its secondary object, to prevent his going in or out of camp without permission. In his life he approximates more closely to an undesirable alien than to a civilian of his own nationality. The greatest difference between an army and an internment camp, he feels, is that the soldier has to work.

Civilians cannot imagine the difficulty which soldiers encounter in getting passes, the calculated humiliations imposed by company sergeant-majors who resent others going out while they stay in camp, the hours spent waiting to collect passes which have already been made out, the thought, the intrigue, and even the money spent on obtaining them. Yet the greater the delay, the more important it becomes to get beyond those bloody gates and walk through fields alone, free from the inquisition of military policemen paid four and threepence a day to be offensive, free from the danger of the sudden fatigue, the noise of a barrack room, the sight of Army huts.

Yet, however many passes you get, your life lies behind the gates. Communal living is the ineluctable condition of the soldier. Those who have been to boarding schools think they know communal life. Army life is coarser, more energetic but less brutal than in a boarding school. Our emotions are strong and simple. Sleeping, feeding and working together breeds comradeship. Each man has a mate. You exchange duties, make one another's beds, cover one another's absence. Yours is the alliance of two, within the structure of greater alliances, your platoon against other platoons, your regiment against other regiments, your fellow rankers against N.C.O.s, commissioned officers, coppers and red caps.

But after a time you notice a habit of your mates which irritates you. Maybe he lets his wind with bravado and always says, 'It must have been them beans.' Maybe it is his way of saying 'Them's fighting words, buddy,' when he can think of nothing else to say. It makes no difference. Whatever it is becomes focus of your hatred. With a passion you thought had died at five, you wait for him to repeat his offence, and when he does, it is like petrol flung on the fire of your rage. How you flare up! You could kill him, like a boot dragged over the floor and the shattered cockroach gummed to the boards by its white intestines.

We are being trained to kill, you see, and it is amazing how

quickly our instinct for murder, disciplined by civilization to lie quiet, gets up, vigorous, at encouragement. It is not so amazing that Jerry, the fellow conscript in another land, is not the only focus for our rifle sights. If bullets solve arguments, the brain ponders, why not dispute in lead with sergeant, C.S.M. and officers? Many old scores are paid on the battlefield.

You don't think like that in Civvy Street. But it comes naturally to us, the boys in battle dress. It's a gift, gift from the W.O., along with our rifles and the bayonets we are trained to stick in stuffed sacks. 'If you see a Jerry, lying wounded on the ground,' says the instructor, 'stick 'im, before you go on. The more dead Jerries there are, the better.'

Don't think we spend all day nursing murder. I just give you this to show how we are different. The annoyance which would pass in a moment becomes the impulse to kill. All emotions are exaggerated in the same way. Our greed, for example. You should see us at table, the knives scooping more than our share of butter, the spoons heaped with marmalade running on to the boards of the table, the bread cut so thick a man has to gnaw at it, like a dog at a knucklebone. We are afraid that we won't get enough, so we take too much; and two out of twelve go short. We believe that pot. brom. is put in our tea to keep our sexual appetites within bounds. But all our passion is directed towards food. Not women haunt our dreams, but eggs and bacon.

Living conditions in the Army are worse than in a boarding school, though better than in an O.T.C. camp. But the atmosphere of a barrack-room is gentler than a school dormitory. In boarding schools the spiritual welfare of the majority depends on feeling superior to a minority. The way he does his hair, traits of effeminacy, shyness or a hare-lip, denominate a boy for the persecution without which the children of the middle class lapse into self-criticism and doubt. But the only case I have seen of this, since I have been in the Army, was that of L. in my first training camp.

L. hated war more than any of us, and by changing his address he had succeeded in avoiding embodiment for six months. Even after he was caught he continued to resist passively, with the sullen obstinacy of a moke. He refused to wear uniform until the last possible moment. He would not march in step. He did everything wrong. He sassed the sergeant, shirked every fatigue he could, and made fun of everybody who was trying to make the

best of things. His only friend was a boy, who was the dead spit of Karloff in the part of Frankenstein, and who turned out to be half blind (the lucky bastard!). Boris and L. formed a deep friendship: it was the only time you saw them smile, as they mumbled about the war in a corner. It was curiously touching, the love of these two uncouth boys.

If L. had expressed himself better he might have carried others with him, for most felt as he did. But his was not an attractive personality. He suffered from both halitosis and body odour. I don't know if his best friend told him; but his enemies were too kind. They projected their anger on him, for expressing the loathing of war which they themselves suppressed. They bitterly resented his contempt for their efforts to make the best of things. Behind their hatred lay the anxiety of the crowd at finding someone different. But they made neither of the attacks which the boys of Lower V. B. would have made. They never accused him of being a Fifth Columnist and they never taunted him with his stinking breath.

I do not know why this innate good taste is found in barrack rooms but not in boarding schools. Perhaps it is that the public and private lives of conscripts remain distinct, whereas the private ambitions of most schoolboys are merged with their public achievement. To make the Cricket Eleven or become a prefect may be a great personal triumph: to be made a sergeant is trivial, when violent death is the common fear of you and your comrades. Cowardice, the ultimate sin of schoolboys, is the common state of soldiers. The heroic attitudes, which survive in civil defence forces, are rare among us conscripts. For us, the simple struggle for survival, the immediate perspective of the present.

Our public life is one of strong primary sensations and emotions. There are times of physical suffering when our hands are so numb with cold that fingers feel brittle, or when our feet are blistered on a route march and each step is needles jabbed into the flesh. There are moments of physical ecstasy, the fingers thawing out, fatigue coursing through the relaxed limbs, hot toast before a fire, or lying beyond *réveillé* on the warmth of a straw palliase. Moments of delight, as when the order confining ninety per cent of troops to barracks was rescinded, and in thirty seconds the news, 'No more passes, no more passes', ran through the camp. It was like fire across dry grass the speed it spread. 'No more passes!' shouted

from barrack spider to spider, across the square, through the canteens and the billiard halls, loud voices and soft, high and low; but the same note in all of joy and sudden relief. We could move without authority from behind the barbed wire into the town. We could walk into a pub. We could see strange faces, look at girls and laugh. There are moments of grief, as when the telegram came that F.'s mother was killed by a bomb, and we fell silent thinking of our own, when B. returned from London at the beginning of the Blitz and fell on his bed, crying, 'They wiped out the East End, they wiped it out,' when the Bren-gun carrier overturned and two men were pinned to death beneath it, or when the popular despatch rider crashed at the crossroads by the R.A.C. box and we collected money for his widow. Moments of happiness, singing and laughing, glad in the warm sun, lying in the grass looking up at the sky, sweating after a run, feeling the strength of our bodies.

The only terms which fit our public life are mystical. These emotions are shared by all of us, but belong to none. They are generated by living together, like the heat of two naked bodies lying together in a bed. And, beneath this corporate life, run our separate private lives, which seldom emerge in the daylight of the barrack room. We exist together, lubricating our contact with jokes and slogans and horseplay. But our minds are commanded by civilian interests, our families and friends, sports, hobbies, and the lore of a former trade. Standing in threes on the parade ground, the thirty men, who act as one, are dreaming like thirty of their homes and the cabbage patch, tallyman and income-tax, the bombs raining on the just and the unjust.

But at night private thoughts come into the open. I often return to camp on a late pass and undress in the dark, by the light of matches or the dying glow of the stove. The air is warm and thick with the stench of feet. The others are asleep. With their battle dress they have slipped off their public lives and meet their private images in dreams. They talk in their sleep. It may be the fierce voice of argument, a childish whimper, the naked horror of nightmare or a trailing vocative of love; but whatever the tone, it appears, as startling as a human face rising to the surface in a quiet pool, and disappears again as the sleeper turns on the iron slats of his bed and falls into a deeper sleep, relieved.

This barrack room is where we live by day. We dress and

undress, lie resting on the dirty palliasses between parades, write letters at the trestle table, play rummy, brag, or knock-out whist. We sing and squabble and brush our boots here, laugh and toast cheese and scan the *Daily Mirror* for news of London raids. That is our day life, a busy surface existence like little black beetles skimming on a pond. But sleep and darkness give cover to privy thoughts. They creep out like the mice that eat biscuits in our lockers the moment the watcher nods. The barrack room is like a confessional, when I tiptoe in at midnight and the mice scamper squeaking away, and the men break the foot-heavy air with their abrupt alarms.

WHAT I LIKE

I don't take exercise unless I have to: never walk, if I can ride: run only to save time. I go to bed at midnight because no one stops up much later, and I get up as late as I can, because I love to lie in bed.

But at the same time I love the feeling of health which only hard physical work will give: and if I had the courage I would spend half my life working from 2 p.m. to dawn and sleeping the rest of the time. The routine which associates day with work and night with sleep may be useful, but it cramps a writer. For me, perhaps because my thoughts too are like the mice which grow bolder after dusk, night is the best time for work.

I thank the Army for breaking down my physical laziness and scattering the convention of fixed hours. When the body grows hard and muscles tighten, physical effort is a pleasure. It is good to feel as ravenous as a boy of fourteen, to walk with a spring in the foot and take even pleasure in physical exertion. It is even better to be forced to see each day dawn—who ever can rave of sunsets who knows the subtle ways the first light breaks across the sky and over the earth?—to be forced to watch from two to four in the morning the curious hallucinations of fatigue, which make bushes run up a hill and crouch like men, how tired eyes set the still night world moving. I am glad I know how it feels to work eight hours in the twenty-four, spaced out as 'two hours on and four hours off'. There is a comfort in being so fagged you can lie on iron slats and fall asleep.

The Army has taught me a new way of looking at landscape. Previously I thought in literary metaphor, pleased, for example,

to discover that the late light of the sun, caught on the backs of wheeling plovers, made them like drifting sheets of pink paper. Now metaphors are military. A man standing at six hundred yards looks like a post: kneeling at four hundred, with rifle in the aim, he might be a bush. It is a limited vocabulary. But it demands precise comparison, the reward of which may not be literature, but life itself.

I do not know whether others share these feelings, or whether they are the exclusive compensation of writers, those scavengers for whom no experience is completely worthless or completely unpleasant. We conscripts do not talk about things like these, or if we do, it's to say, 'I was healthy enough in Civvy Street, with the missus in bed every night and a whole skin, thank you very much.'

THE SPIRIT OF TOC H

From the strain of a twenty-four-hour duty arises a new type of comradeship. During normal routine our sense of comradeship is what must be felt by a drove of sheep with the foreboding that the reason why they are being fattened up is because they are going to the slaughterhouse soon. But common endurance transmutes this comradeship. Jokes which relieve the tension are funnier than ever, and the alleviations, such as extra rations, are treasured luxuries. We are like men without cigarettes but with a dozen bottles of whisky, at the same time rich and poor.

Long after these duties are over we recall them in conversation. They remain in memory, and sentiment endows what at the time was most unpleasant with the greatest glamour. From links such as these is forged the chain which binds ex-service men together. The old fighters sacramentalize their agony, strange dissimilars discovering a kinship in a common ordeal.

Yet to those who never shared in that experience, this resurrection of past suffering appears in curiously bad taste. It is as if Christ on the Road to Emmaus had sentimentalized His suffering on the Cross.

THE SERGEANT'S HANGOVER

We lead a corporate existence, shared by all but belonging to none. The vital organ of this corporation is the leader. He is the heart,

the brain, or both. The quality of a leader is even more important than the training of his men.

You see this in drill. Good drill depends not just on the word of command being audible or delivered on the right foot. The tone of the voice creates its own reaction. The performance of two different platoons under the same N.C.O. has more in common than the performance of the same platoon under two different N.C.O.s. It is impossible for a platoon, however efficient, to drill smartly under an N.C.O. with a blurred word of command. It is as if the men had weights on their arms and legs. They are hypnotized by his lethargy.

I hate this mystical terminology. But the relation of leader and led is as close as brain and limbs. More contagious than clap, fear or courage, doubt or confidence can spread from a leader through his body of men. The image of his faults and virtues is stamped on those beneath him. Away from his command they may regain their individuality; but under it he is like a drug in their veins, that may stimulate or stupefy, but cannot be countered by will. If the sergeant gets drunk at night, the next morning his men have a hangover.

SIX GOLDEN RULES FOR RAW RECRUITS

1. Do everything which you can't avoid briskly, smartly and efficiently, remembering that the majority of fatigues are given to those who look as if they don't want to do them.

2. Train yourself to assess the characters of those in authority over you. Everyone has his weakness. Do not despise crude appeals to snobbery, greed or sentiment. Never refuse to lend money to an N.C.O.—once. He has committed a crime in borrowing and you can get what you like out of him. Do not forget that sometimes the best way to get something is to pretend not to want it.

3. If you can't 'wangle' what you want, surrender with a good grace. If an N.C.O. won't or can't cover you, you stand very little chance of getting by on your own.

4. If you make a bargain with an N.C.O., keep it at whatever cost to yourself. Otherwise you'll get him into trouble and yourself as well.

5. Pretend to punctiliousness of procedure, even to the point of idiocy. The man who appears overcareful not to transgress any of the Army rules can get away with twice as much as the man who doesn't give a damn.

6. When you feel despondent, remember that there is a way of getting almost anything you want in the Army, but the way is always tortuous and obscure.

THE HEROIC ATTITUDE

In the defence forces the heroic attitude persists. Men and women face death with courage, at the Wardens' Post and the Auxiliary Fire sub-station, spotting planes and fires from roofs, treating the wounded in the streets. For Day-Lewis, 'peering out for invaders', there is a fine unity in the Home Guard.

Destiny, History, Fortitude, Honour—all
The words of the politicians seem too big or too small
For the ragtag fighters of lane and shadow, the love that
has grown
Familiar as working clothes, faithful as bone to bone.

What have they got, the ragtag fighters of lane and shadow, which the conscript army lacks?

Patriotism for us is not Parliament, the Lord Mayor of London, Royal Ascot or the British Empire. It is the house and street we live in, our families and friends, security and freedom of movement. For these we want to fight; we would give our lives to save our wives and children; we would run danger to succour the wounded; we would never let the invader land and live here.

But this is not our certain function. We do what we are told, or else jankers and the glasshouse. We are not the people's army, the ragtag fighters, but members of His Majesty's Forces, who go where they are ordered. It may be Libya, to take a desert from the Italians; or India, to arrest more friends of Mr. Nehru; or Poland, to assist the Poles to wreak vengeance on their oppressors. And the reason why we have not got the heroic attitude is because no one has persuaded us yet that dying on foreign soil is going to help Millie, and Daisy and Lou, back in Bermondsey; or even that it will help our sort of people in Prague, Cracow, Bruges, or Padua. We're willing to be convinced, but it will take more than words

to persuade us, more than the lovely promises that didn't fill our fathers' bellies when they were demobbed after the last war. Till we're convinced, we'll carry on the way we are, laughing with the infuriating sceptical laughter of the twice shy.

LETTER FROM FRANCE

DEAREST COMRADE,

October 1940

When I first started this letter I meant to give as much news as I could about conditions in France at the present moment, and also to give some news of friends and of how personally we are getting on, and then throw it into the letter box as one throws a bottle into the sea. The B.B.C. tells us every day that these bottles occasionally reach the shores of 'the precious stone set in the silver sea', so I suppose there is an offchance it may slip through the censorship and reach you. On re-reading it, however, I consider it really too dangerous to mix public and private news, as the private part, however carefully veiled, might give a clue not only to my own identity but also to that of my informants. Living in a sub-totalitarian country one must obey, I suppose, the elementary rules of conspiracy. I have, therefore, destroyed the first page of this letter which gave news of many people whom you know, and for the moment will just say that everybody is all right, at any rate for the moment, although terribly anxious. We personally are well and get plenty to eat so far, though this is rather a struggle.

I am trying to cram into this letter everything I think may be of interest. In many ways, however, you are, no doubt, better informed than we are about what goes on in this country, as our Government of beaten generals, senile men of straw and common crooks, does its best to keep us in totalitarian darkness. Its moral and physical decrepitude, however, is too great for the black-out to be very efficient, and some items come my way which may be of interest to you. If the French censorship opens this letter, of course it will never reach you, unless the censor is a partisan of de Gaulle, which, considering all one hears, seems quite possible. Should the British censor open it, he will, I trust, excuse the absence of signature (of course you may communicate my name to the British authorities if they ask for it) and pass it on to you