

EXPERT TALKS ON COURAGE

General Slim Discusses a Basic Virtue

"COURAGE is the thing," said Sir James Barrie, "all goes if courage goes." What constitutes courage in its various forms was discussed recently by General Sir William Slim, former commander of the 14th Army, and Commander-in-chief, South East Asia, in a talk broadcast in the Overseas Service of the BBC. Here is what he said:

I DON'T believe there is any man who in his heart of hearts wouldn't rather be called brave than have any other virtue attributed to him. And this elemental—if you like unreasoning male attitude—is a sound one, because courage is not merely a virtue, but is the virtue. Without it there are no other virtues. Faith, hope, charity—all the rest—don't become virtues until it takes courage to exercise them. Courage isn't only the basis of all virtue—it's its expression. True, you may be bad and brave, but you can't be good without being brave. Courage is a mental state, an affair of the spirit, and so it gets its strength from spiritual and intellectual sources. The way in which these spiritual and intellectual elements are blended, I think, produces roughly the two types of courage. The first, an emotional state, which enables a man to risk danger or death—physical courage. The second, a more reasoning attitude which enables him to stake coolly his happiness, his whole future on his judgment of what he thinks are right or worthwhile—moral courage. Now these two types of courage, physical and moral, are very distinct. I have known many men who had marked physical courage who lacked moral courage. Some of them were in high places, but they failed to be great in themselves because they lacked it. On the other hand, I have seen men who undoubtedly possessed moral courage very cautious about taking physical risks. But I have never met a man with moral courage who wouldn't, when it was really necessary, face bodily danger. Moral courage is a higher and a rarer virtue than physical courage. To be really great a man, or for that matter, a nation, must possess both kinds of courage.

Japanese Courage

In this the Japanese were an interesting study. No other army has ever possessed massed physical courage as the Japanese did. Its whole strength lay in the bravery of the individual soldier. The Japanese generals shared their men's physical bravery to the full, but they lacked to a man moral courage. They hadn't the moral courage to admit when their plans had failed and ought to have been changed, to tell their superiors that their orders couldn't be carried out, and retreat while there was still time. We played on this weakness and by it the Japanese commanders lost their battles and destroyed their armies.

Like Money in a Bank

All men have some degree of physical courage—it's surprising how much. Courage, you know, is like having money in a bank—we start with a fair bit of capital courage—some large, some small, and we proceed to draw on our balance; for don't forget, courage is an expendable quality, we can use it up. If there

are heavy, and what is more serious, if there are continuous calls on our courage, we begin to overdraw. If we go on over-drawing we go bankrupt, we break down. You can see this overdraw mounting clearly in the men who endure the most prolonged strains in war. The submarine complement, the infantry platoon, the banner crew. First there comes a growing impatience and irritability, then recklessness, the sort of "To hell with it chaps, we'll attack!" next real foolhardiness—what the soldier calls "asking for it," and, last, sudden changes of mood from false hilarity to black moroseness. Just before that stage is reached, if the man's commander has spotted what is happening and pulled him out for a rest, he will recover. In a few months he'll be back again as brave and as balanced as ever. The capital in his bank of courage will have built up and he can start spending again.

There are, of course, some people whose capital is so small that it isn't worth while employing in peace or war, in any job requiring courage—they overdraw too quickly. With us these types are surprisingly few—complete cowards are almost non-existent. Another matter for astonishment is the large number of men and women in any group who behave in an emergency with extreme gallantry. Who they'll be you can't tell until they're tested. I have given up long ago trying to spot potential V.C.'s by their looks. But from experience I should say that those who perform individual acts of the highest physical courage are usually drawn from one of two categories. Either those with quick intelligence and vivid imagination or those without imagination and with minds fixed on the tactical business of living. You might almost say, I suppose, those who live on their nerves and those who haven't got any nerves. The one suddenly sees the crisis, his imagination flashes the opportunity and he acts. The other meets the situation without finding it so very unusual and deals with it in a matter of fact way.

Examples from Two Wars

Long ago in the first World War when I was a bit more irresponsible, I served under an officer of vivid imagination. He was always fussing about dangers that usually didn't exist. Once, after a day and half a night of his constant alarms, I was so fed up that I disconnected the telephone in the advance post I was holding. I wanted some sleep. I didn't get it. Within half-an-hour his imagination had painted the most frightful picture of my position over-run by the enemy. He arrived with a reserve company to retake it. As he was my commanding officer I had some rather difficult explaining to do. I thought he was just windy. A few days later he won the V.C. by a superb example of leadership and courage.



BBC photograph

GENERAL SIR WILLIAM SLIM
"You can't be good without being brave"

Again, in this last war in Burma, a young Gurkha won the V.C. At a critical moment when Japanese tanks had broken through our forward positions he took his Piat—that's an anti-tank grenade discharger—and leaving cover, moved forward towards the tanks. He was shot in the hand, the shoulder, and again badly in the leg. But he got to within 30 yards of the tanks, and he bumped off two of them. Later when I saw him in hospital I asked him why he walked forward in the open like that. He replied: "I'd been trained not to throw my Piat till I was sure of hitting. I knew I could hit at 30 yards and so I went to 30 yards." He had only one thought in his head—to get to 30 yards. Quite simple if you aren't bothered with imagination.

Can courage be taught? I am sure in one sense physical courage can. What in effect you must do is to train a man not to draw too heavily on his stock of courage. Teach him what to expect and not to be afraid of bogies—of the unknown. If you send an untrained British soldier on patrol in the jungle—every time a branch creaks, every time there's a rustle in the undergrowth, when an animal slinks across the track—he will draw heavily and unnecessarily on his stock of courage. And he will come back a shaken man, with a report of no value. But if you train that man before—let him live in jungle, teach him its craft, and then send him on patrol, he will come back with his balance of courage unimpaired, and probably a couple of Japanese helmets into the bargain.

To teach moral courage is another matter. And it has to be taught, because so few, if any, have it naturally. The young can learn it from their parents, in their homes, from school and university, from religion, from other early influences, but to inculcate it in a grown-up who lacks it, requires not so much teaching as some striking emotional experience, something that suddenly bursts on him, something in the

nature of a vision. And that's why you find that most men who have moral courage learnt it by precept or example in their youth.

Not a Military Monopoly

Now I suppose because I'm a soldier I have talked most of courage in men at war. But the fighting man doesn't have a monopoly in courage. Many a soldier in the last war has steeled himself in battle with the thought of what his civilian countrymen and women were enduring and how they were enduring it. Whether women are braver than men I don't know, but I've always found them, when really tested, at least equally brave. In the retreat from Burma in 1942 I was deeply proud of the troops who staggered into India, exhausted, dirty, ragged, reduced to a remnant, but carrying their weapons ready to turn again and face the enemy. But the outstanding impression of courage I carried away from that rather desperate campaign was from the Indian women refugees. Day after day, mile after mile, they plodded on, through dust or mud, babies in their arms, children clinging to their skirts, harried by merciless enemies, strafed from the air, shelterless, caught between the lines in every battle, but patient, uncomplaining, devoted, thinking only of their families, and so very brave.

Now without talking any nonsense about master races as the Japanese and Germans did, it is a fact that races do vary in courage. There are races which are braver than others. And you jolly soon find out which they are when you're fighting. I should say it mostly depended on where they had been living for the last five or six hundred years. If it was in a land where it didn't take much effort to get enough food, clothing and shelter, for an easy life, they won't be conspicuously brave. If their life has been so hard that it's a terrible struggle to keep any standard at all, they may be brave in a few things—the dangers to which they are inured—but they won't be brave in others. It's from the lands where nature is neither too easy nor too cruel, where a man must work hard to live, but where his efforts and his enterprise can bring him great rewards—those are the lands that breed courage, and where it becomes a natural tradition.

And don't run away with the idea that this limits courage to Europe and North America. Believe me, and I have fought both with and against them, some of the bravest races in the world aren't white at all. And while nations vary in the amount of their courage, they vary too in its type.

Endurance is the Essence

We, the British, have our own special kind of courage—a courage that goes on. And endurance is the very essence of courage. Courage is a long-term virtue. Anybody can be brave for a little while. The British are no braver than the Germans, the French, the Italians, or anybody else, but they are brave for a bit longer. This going on being brave when most others have given up has been the characteristic of our courage. It is interesting to speculate how they developed this particular and effective kind of courage. I am inclined to think that like so much in the world it has been a matter of geography and history. We draw our racial stock almost wholly from northern Europe—one of the good areas for natural courage. And our intellectual and cultural heritage

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