

CITIZEN INTO SOLDIER

(6) Is Drill Necessary?

THIS week we are back on drill routine again, after a week spent in special training. So I have had to try once again to make up my mind about this drill business.

I am inclined to agree that the Home Guard might well give it a miss. After all, it will be of little use to a Home Guardsman shooting from behind a hedge or through a window if he is able to keep his leg braced doing a right turn.

And, speaking personally, I am inclined to think that it will not help me much in this new sort of war if I am able to slope arms, however perfectly. I can halt on the right foot, but as far as I can see modern warfare will not give me time to halt at all. I shall have to go like hell, in whatever direction.

That, as I say, is my personal reaction, and I am a poor enough soldier to be happy about it, and, as I said a week or so back, happy also that so many of my contemporaries think the same way.

We don't want to think with one mind, or not think at all. We want at

all costs to remain individuals, because whatever we don't know about the war aims of nations, we know just this about the war aims of the common soldier: he's fighting to retain his right to object to things, to complain, to criticise, to be a nuisance if he wants to, and to acquiesce only if he sees fit.

From that point of view drill on the parade ground is pretty much like bunkum. We like it as much as you like standing in a theatre queue. You fidget in a queue, do you not? You have better things to do than stand and wait? It's much the same on the parade ground.

Two Views of Drill

Now, that is my personal point of view about drill. I have another. Two others, as a matter of fact. One I supply myself, the other is supplied to me.

The one I supply myself concerns the inevitable satisfaction anyone must gain from being part of an efficient unit.

No doubt, when travelling by train, you have looked out the window on a corner and admired the sweeping line of the carriages as they take the curve beneath the engine's plume of smoke and steam. There is very much the

same sensation in watching the ranks curve ahead of you on a route march—the heave of the shoulders, the pendulum arms, the feet bent in time from the ankle, lifted forward, dropped down, flattened, bent, lifted again. It is rhythm and rhythm is always fascinating. It is good to be a part of a rhythmical movement. Why else do we dance in crowded halls, and submit our ears to the torture of dance bands? There is even something pleasant about the hideous noise the engines make in the tunnels on the Rimutaka incline, so long as it is rhythmical.

Marching, from that point of view, is something to be enjoyed. With other drill movements it is the same. Those of you who did not see the guard of honour for the new Governor-General when he arrived in Wellington probably heard the ceremony on the radio. Did you hear the perfect timing of the movements? That sort of thing is as fine to work in as it is pretty to watch.

"The Only Real Compensation"

The individual in me knows that it is stupid, childish, primitive, to enjoy such exhibitions, but whatever remains

in me of Neanderthal man (and that is probably plenty) enjoys it thoroughly. That is the only real compensation I find for drill.

The other point of view is the one the army supplies. We are told that drill makes for discipline, and is therefore necessary.

Against that statement, I have no argument.

I have some against the manner of applying the rule. Many thousand recruits at present in training will bear me out in saying that the army drills us to discipline us and forgets to keep us interested.

The Instructor

There are some excellent drill instructors—men with intelligence. I have worked under some of them, and it has almost been a pleasure, because they have known about my primitive weakness for rhythm, and played on my liking for seeing a spectacle performed in a spectacular manner.

But there is something wrong with our country at the moment that is keeping many of its best brains out of the army. I don't mean the professional men, or the business executives, and so on. I mean the young man who is capable of realising the simple psychological principles I have been trying to expound, and of playing on them. The Army can turn out instructors well schooled in the book of words; but they are only automatons, and the Army system has no recipe for supplying brains.

These come from the country itself, and I have seen so many intelligent young men deliberately remain in the ranks so that their training will extend no longer than three months that I am sure this country is not supplying all its brains to the army.

I cannot here dwell on the reasons for this. Maybe they are social, or political, and maybe one of the main reasons is that our Territorial Army has been and still is to some extent, officered by the preferential system. But even if we are wrong there (and a Cabinet Minister denied it on January 10), the fact remains that drill for most recruits is a complete and utter bore.

"It Makes Us Dull"

That's about the position. An army does need discipline, and drill is about the only generally serviceable way of establishing it; but an army also needs brains, and nothing kills brains so quickly as drill administered in such large and inconsiderate doses as we are getting now. We all recognise the need for discipline. We prefer the hard officer who is fair, to a soft one who is stupid. We know we have to co-operate, work together, act as one unit, react correctly to commands. But we also know that war is no longer a matter of battering dull heads against stone walls.

All this brings us back to the man who runs the squad, or the platoon, or the company, or the battalion, or whatever. And he comes from the streets in your town. Look around and see whether it is the shape of his head that counts or which street he comes from.

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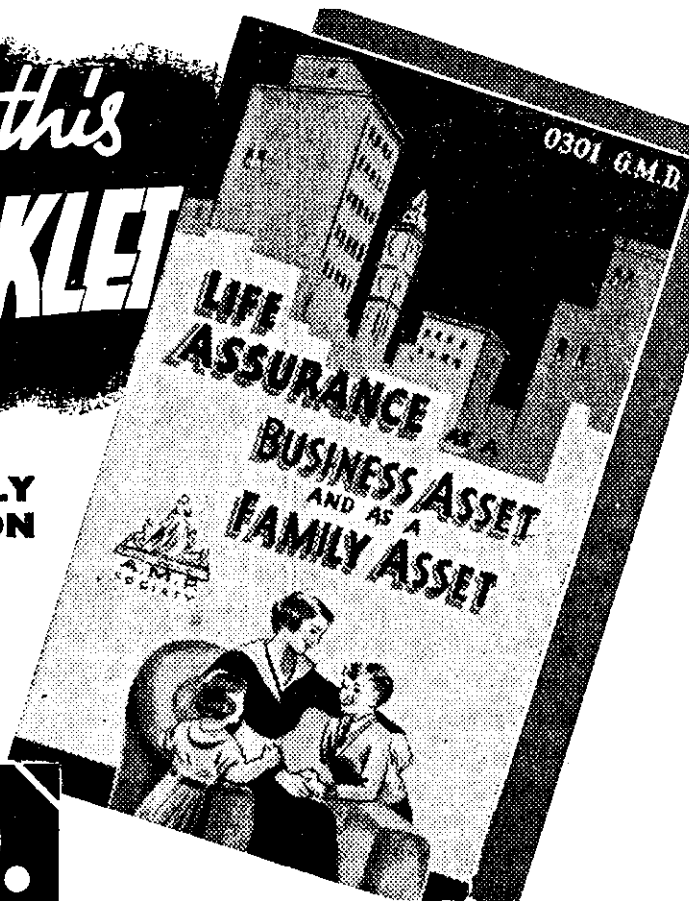
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