

CHILDREN-IN-ARMS?

A Devastating Critic Of The Army With A Constructive Purpose

SO far, the war has produced no songs that every soldier sings, and almost no books, big or little, that every soldier talks about. But such a book has now appeared: "Bless 'Em All," by an Australian who hides behind the pen-name "Boomerang." We referred to it briefly in last week's leading article. Now we give ourselves space to quote more freely.

AS we said last week, *Bless 'Em All* is an irreverent book written with a reverent purpose. The author begins with the bald statement that the British Army is a bad one, and plunges at once into the reasons why. He sweeps aside the usual excuse that the army has been badly equipped.

"The R.A.F. was let down on the supply side much more badly than the Army; our airmen had every reason to sit down and moan that they had not been given the 'planes necessary for fighting the Germans: yet in September, 1940, they went up in their meagre squadrons and won the Battle of Britain. In June, 1940, the Navy suddenly found itself with far fewer ships than it needed; the French Fleet was no longer its ally, the



"... A ritualistic gentlemanly conception of life"

Italian Fleet had become its enemy, and Hitler had acquired the use of every ship-building yard on the coast of Europe. In spite of this dramatic dangerous shift of the naval balance, the Navy won the Battle of the Atlantic. These are tangible victories to set against the Army's definite defeats. They bear out the general impression that the R.A.F. and the Navy are far more efficient than the Army."

The reasons of this greater efficiency he discusses at some length, admitting that he exaggerates, but driving home his points in paragraphs like this:

"An incompetent admiral will run his ship on the rocks. An incompetent squadron-leader will crash his 'plane. A sailor or an airman has to be capable of mastering practical aeronautics and navigation, of conquering the sea or the sky, if he is to survive. He has to fight a successful battle against the power of the elements and the force of gravity before he can even get within fighting distance of the enemy. The soldier has no such inexorable intelligence tests to pass.



"... A stock figure of fun—and of fact"

There are no simple natural catastrophes to kill off incompetent colonels."

Why Is the Army Funny?

A little later he is asking why the Army, and never the Navy, or the Air Force, is always funny:

"When Low created his great comic character, he christened him Colonel Blimp; it would have been unthinkable to call him Admiral Blimp or Wing-Commander Blimp. Nobody would laugh at a stupid admiral who was hazy on the principles of modern navigation and regretted the passing of sailing ships. Or at the wing-commander who did not understand how a machine which was heavier than air could fly, and thought that balloons would be better. But everybody accepts as a stock figure of fun—and of fact—the colonel who knows nothing of modern war, who regrets that cavalry should give way to tanks. who thinks the bayonet a more gentlemanly weapon than the sub-machine gun, and doesn't want to give Tommy-guns to soldiers anyhow because they can't be taught to do arms drill with them."

And then, in case we should think that he is either an irresponsible joker or a man with a grouse, he adds a few pages later:

"Consider mothers-in-law. You will hear plenty of stock jokes about them in general. You will hear plenty of husbands grouching about their own in particular. But the joking and the grouching do not mean that mothers-in-law do not exist. On the contrary, they prove that they exist as a serious problem, that it is very difficult to be a good mother-in-law, and that many mothers-in-law are a source of friction in the family. In the same way, I believe the jests and grumbles about the Army indicate that there are things seriously wrong with it. These things are not irremovable, like mothers-in-law; so there is no need, in their case, to make the best of them: to let off steam by the traditional English methods of turning a serious problem into a joke or a

grouse. We can realise the advantage of the English character, we can applaud joking and grumbling as excellent safety-valves, which save the boiler from bursting and the engine from going off the rails. But we can remember that safety-valves can be too good; if too much steam is let off through them, the engine will never get anywhere."

Wrong End of the Stick

On the question of military and civilian morale, he insists that the authorities are holding the wrong end of the stick—that it is not the public who require constant attention but the bored and bewildered legions in camp. More than once we have this note:

"It is always the custom in Britain to assume that the morale of the troops is excellent, and to act on the assumption that the morale of the civilians is not. Any hint, any suggestion, that the morale of the Army is not tip-top high, any argument that it needs careful concern, is regarded as the shocking seditious burbling of a slanderous scoundrel. On the other hand, civilian morale is the constant preoccupation of the authorities. It is the civilian, not the soldier, who receives stirring exhortations from the newspapers calling on him to be bloody, bold, and resolute, to square his shoulders, set his teeth, clench his fists, stiffen his sinews, summon up his blood, hold up his head, gird up his loins, pull up his socks. The Press provides uplift for his morale, the radio sustains it. The Ministry of Information watches over it with tender care, and takes tests at regular intervals of public opinion all over the country to make sure the patient is keeping up his strength."

"As Simple As A Baby's"

But everything that we have quoted so far is tame. The burden of his story is that the army treats men as children and spends precious hours teaching them things that they don't greatly require to know. In the end they become children:

"I have found little harsh or brutal about my life: it is simply childish. Joining the Army is the nearest possible approach to obeying the Biblical injunction to be born again. A soldier-in-arms is the nearest thing on earth to a child-in-arms. Your way of life has the simplicity of a baby's. Everything is arranged for you. The time you get up, the clothes you wear, the hours you work, and the hours you play, the time you are sent to bed at night, tired out by simple bodily fatigue, to sink into the sweet, sodden slumber of childhood. You delight in bodily health: you pass again through your boyhood stage of



"... Bored and bewildered legions"

Narcissism as the muscles grow on your body in the P.T. class. You enjoy simple excitements like riding on lorries, or paddling round a muddy gun-site with great big gumboots on. You revel in schoolboy jokes about sex. You feel your mental age falling lower and lower. Your brain shrinks. The cares of the years, the worries of a grown-up man with a wife and family to support, slip from your shoulders, and you become immersed in a thousand petty problems and pleasures, trials and triumphs."

This, he thinks, is bad enough. But even children can be taught intelligently. They can be encouraged by proficiency prizes:

"The work we had to do was intensely interesting: A.A. gunnery is a fascinating science, with something in it to appeal to everyone: our gun-site was the first to use radio locators, one of the greatest marvels of this war. The prize offered for doing our work well seemed self-evident; the protection from the enemy bombs of our own homes, our wives and our children. Yet our



Army instructors seemed blindly incapable of pointing out this proficiency prize. Most of us were London men; we were in our training depot when the big raids on London began; every night we watched the distant glow of fires over London and saw the sparkle of A.A. shells bursting in the sky; in two months we were to be back there helping to put up that barrage. Yet it passed the wit of the Army to say to us 'Learn this gun-drill properly, and then you will be equipped to fight in defence of your own homes.' It was always 'Learn this gun-drill properly, or I will make you double round the square holding a rifle above your head.'"

The Old Etonian

After arguing that one of the chief causes of our military failures is the fact that our soldiers are underpaid—a reckless argument when we remember the pay in Germany and in Japan—he turns to the selection of officers:

"On this question, then, I am on the side of the Blimps.... I agree with the much abused Colonel Bingham, who was honest enough to speak his mind and the mind of the War Office

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