



When Tommy Atkins Can Argue With His Officer

(From a talk on Army Education by JAMES LANSDALE HODSON, in the BBC's Pacific Service)

THE other morning I was in a room where about a hundred officers and men—and some women—of the Army Pay Corps were busily at work on their ledgers and correspondence. It was about half-past eleven. Suddenly, on a signal, work stopped and those hundred people split up into four groups and began to discuss current affairs and post-war affairs. One group argued about town-planning, a second group discussed the British Empire, a third the Libyan campaign, a fourth ourselves and our American Allies. A lieutenant was in charge of each group. He spoke for a few minutes, outlining the subject and making a few points, and then inviting the discussion to begin. His job was not to hold the floor but to act as impartial chairman and keep the ball rolling. After the talks had gone on for about 40 minutes they all went back to their ledgers and got on with the job.

As Oliver Cromwell Said

* Now what was behind all this? you may ask. How can a country in the middle of the biggest war in history stop work to discuss current affairs? How long has this been going on? Does all the Army do it? Do they stop training on tanks and big guns in order to argue what sort of towns to build after the war or to learn a bit more about our American friends? The answer is: yes, once a week they do. And in the King's time, too, as they say.

The Army Council, knowing that ours is a genuine citizen Army and a democratic Army, has adopted Oliver Cromwell's famous remark: that the soldier must know what he fights for and love what he knows. It isn't enough to give him weapons and teach him how to use them. An Army of paid mercenaries is not sufficient to defeat Mr. Hitler. The will and mind and spirit must be behind it. The soldier must be, so far as possible, a well-informed man, and holding him to the task. When the mind is right the rest will follow.

No Picnic for the Agitator

The Army Bureau of Current Affairs has been set up for the purpose of keeping troops informed and alert about the progress and problems of the war. It has now been going for over a year. There was some opposition to it at first. Some people said that if you set men discussing awkward problems you would be bound to have quarrels and bad blood. If the platoon officer was in charge of a discussion that became angry, wouldn't his authority over the men suffer, wouldn't discipline suffer? Wouldn't the

WITH wise direction and some luck, Army Education may last longer than the Army itself, and longer than most of the men who now make the Army. Meanwhile, in New Zealand, it is just beginning, and if we wish to see what will be happening when it gets properly going, we shall have to look to the United Kingdom. Here is a condensation of a talk by J. L. Hodson, which shows what the possibilities are

soldiers get too political, or, if they didn't, wouldn't they be bored to death with it?

It hasn't worked out that way. Sometimes men have sworn at one another and lost their tempers a bit, sometimes the barrack-room lawyer has had too much of his own way, but that doesn't last. What happens after a bit is that the agitator is answered by men who learn that they, too, have tongues in their heads and can put their views forward. The discussions are a fine safety valve. Here is a chance, once a week, for even a private soldier to tell his officer that he doesn't agree with what the officer has said on some topic: for instance, the Indian problem, or the Dieppe raid, or the Merchant Navy—all subjects that have been discussed recently. This Abca, as it is called—the initials for Army Bureau of Current Affairs—has been sometimes described as dynamite and high explosive, but all it has blown away so far has been ignorance and prejudice.

Nothing for Granted

The warrant officer and sergeant who run this feature of the depot are strongly impressed by the men's critical faculties. The men take nothing for granted. They

want this country to be a different place after the war—no slums; less disparity between wealth and poverty. But at the same time they are a trifle cynical about any promises made about the post-war world. They remember what their fathers have told them about what happened after 1918. But what is so encouraging, I think, is that these talks are stirring up their minds, causing them to think keenly. They are becoming interested in public affairs as they never were before; they are not only learning to be soldiers but to be citizens at the same time. Some are writing short articles to be stuck up to join the wall newspaper. And not only men, but women. The women's Service, known as the A.T.S., has lately grown almost keener on current affairs than the men's services.

Every fortnight Abca issues two pamphlets: one concerned with the Army itself—dealing, perhaps, with Dieppe or Libya or the Armoured Corps, and so forth. The pamphlets on Dieppe have told me far more than the newspapers ever did, both of the plan and of men's individual stories of the fight.

The second kind of pamphlet deals with more general subjects. The latest one I have seen is headed: "What Price Victory?" It discusses the Russian spirit, the German spirit, and goes on to the British spirit. It describes liberty as being not the poet's phrase but the common man's necessity; and it goes on to say that our love of the British way of life doesn't mean that we can afford to be self-satisfied with British values and institutions. The common purpose of all decent British, it says, whatever their incomes or politics, is to put right after the war the wrongs that have too long existed in industry, housing, public health, old age, inequalities of schooling, and so on. It goes on to say that the conditions and consequences of victory must be taking shape in our minds here and

now, or the victory will prove the mirage it became after 1918. There is a reminder of the price in blood and tears the Army will have to pay—that we haven't yet paid as dearly as the Czechs, the Russians, the Poles; and that greater endurances and sacrifices will yet be wrung from us.

Much Straight Talk

You will see there is a lot of straight talk in these pamphlets, and it suits the temper of the men. You can't be too blunt for them. They've no use for stuff wrapped in cotton wool. They have got past that. We are opening their eyes to the facts of the case. But let me emphasise

(Cont. on next page)



A N.Z. discussion group in the open air