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The Officer and His Men

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The first responsibility of the officer is not merely to train and to lead his men, but to know them.

The object of all training is to turn a man into a soldier. The observations that follow on the subject of the "care of men" are not offered out of particular solicitude for the man's soul, feet or stomach; nor are they presented with the vague intention of "helping an officer with his work." They are written solely and specifically to enable an officer to see that his men are fit and competent to play their part on a modern battlefield. There is here no question of "pampering the soldier." For the officer the only question at issue is "How do I insure that my men shall give of their best in battle?" No officer can afford to overlook the stark fact that at the end of all training is the battlefield. The final test of his work is only to be discovered on the battlefield.

Care of Men

"Care of Men" is a necessary foundation of all successful training. The man who is discontented and unwilling to learn takes longer to train, and can never reach a satisfactory standard of training.

A reasonable degree of receptivity on the part of the pupil is indispensable to every instructor. This receptivity on the part of the man must be largely influenced by the personal factors affecting his private life. These personal factors thus become of basic importance in his military career; and an officer's responsibility begins at this foundational point. At no hour of the day or night is he absolved from this responsibility; the Army does not put up the shutters or close the office door at half-past five. In civil life a manager or foreman is responsible for his staff or his "gang" for some seven or eight hours of the day. The officer is responsible for his men for twenty-four hours each and every day.

Two thousand five hundred years ago one of the great commanders of history told his junior officers that their first duty was to see that their men were "happy"; the rest would follow. The soldier of today may have been invested with weapons the ancients never knew; but he remains a man—and not merely an automaton rigged out in battle dress.

Mental Background

The first responsibility of the officer is not merely to train and to lead his men, *but to know them.* Although he may know every training manual by heart, if he cannot claim to know his men he fails as an officer. He must elucidate for himself their mental background. He must find out what they are thinking and what are their worries. The officer who visits his men at meal times and calls out "any complaints?" is merely asking for the almost inevitable response—a response as meaningless and automatic as the question itself.

An officer who is really doing his job will see for himself and check up. Men will show a queer loyalty even to an unsatisfactory officer; they will rarely complain over his head to a senior officer. The intelligent officer will ask, "Are the dinners good today?—Are the potatoes better than they were yesterday?" and ring the obvious variations. If he puts parrot questions, he must expect parrot answers.

If a complaint should be forthcoming on any topic whatsoever, he should never regard it as frivolous—unless it happens to be nothing more than good-humored grousing. No complaint can be entirely frivolous if it is put forward in all seriousness. If there is nothing in the complaint itself, the indication is that the man's mental background is at fault—and this is his officer's responsibility. It is perfectly well realized that an officer can only hope to penetrate this mental background through imaginative sympathy and an understanding of human nature and that these qualities of the mind cannot be acquired as a result of some external injunction. Nevertheless, they are likely to be developed unconsciously if the officer continually addresses his mind to the simple question, "What little thing more can I do for my men?"

There is no surer way for an officer to get to know his men than to take part in their games and to assist in their organization. His platoon or his company, instead of taking on the complexion of a solid wad of raw humanity, will become a collection of individuals, a knowledge of whose character will stand him in good stead under the supreme test of battle. It may further be noted that one unquestioned lesson of war is that regular healthy recreation for all men in camp and, when possible, in the field is as essential a part of the soldier's profession as his routine training.

The Officer's Military Background

The complement to the man's "mental background" must be the officer's military background. It is a quality of the mind he can never hope to acquire until he stops thinking of himself as a civilian. Both on and off duty he must remember that the uniform he wears indicates an assumption of responsibility far in excess of his former civilian responsibilities —whatever their nature. In war he is responsible not only for the welfare but for the lives of his men. He must get to "know the Army" and to think in terms of the Army.

To "know the Army" is a condition of spiritual awareness of a great comradeship that can only come as a result of intimacy and experience, but to "think in terms of the Army" is largely a matter of taking thought. In civilian life in an industrialized country the civilian is asked to do less and less thinking for himself; he is rarely flung back on his own qualities and initiative and resourcefulness; the convenience and luxuries of life are "laid on"; one turns a tap or puts the money on the counter. Life in the Army, under active service conditions, represents something in the nature of a reversion to a past age. The individual is largely thrown back upon his own resources; and although these resources may be forthcoming from the administrative services, it is still the responsibility of the individual to see that they are used to the best advantage.

The rations may be the same along the length of the line, but *the dinners will vary according to the trouble that has been taken over them;* and the wise officer will recollect that, in war, a hot meal before going into action represents a reinforcement of morale out of all proportion to the trouble and ingenuity its preparation demands.

In civilian life the art of improvisation is rarely imposed on the individual; in the Army the officer must regard it as a matter of course.

If his men are wet through and the billets destitute of any form of heating and if there is coal or wood anywhere within transportable distance, he will not settle down to his own dinner until the men's clothes are being dried and the billets warmed; nor, if their stay in them is to be prolonged, will he be satisfied with these billets until he has contrived to introduce as many small comforts as possible.

The art of improvisation needs to be exercised to the full under really difficult conditions; and in these days of air warfare, when communications and supplies are likely to be interrupted to a degree never experienced in the last war, the officer can never be certain that he will not suddenly be thrown back upon his own resources of ingenuity and determination.

It will be apparent from these observations that an officer who moves about his work with this military background to his day by day activities is asked to assume a habit of thought that must become second nature to him.

Cooperation With Civilians

When an officer is called upon to improvise the essential comforts of life for his men, he will almost certainly find it necessary to secure civilian cooperation. He need not doubt that this civilian cooperation will be readily available if he shows tact and consideration in his requests.

He must not wait for his men to show the necessary initiative. It is unquestionable that the average soldier displays a curious diffidence about approaching local inhabitants for such assistance as they might easily render. His uniform puts him in a race apart from the general run of civilian life, and if he belongs to some isolated detachment he will sometimes prefer to go without some small thing rather than knock at some civilian door.

The officer must intervene on his behalf. An officer's uniform should not be necessary to secure such obvious amenities for his troops, but the fact remains that it works like a charm, and the officer should not hesitate to exercise it on behalf of his men.

In all such dealings with local inhabitants the officer must remember that his own attitude, and the behavior of his troops, will directly influence the reception accorded his successors. This warning has special reference to the condition in which the houses are left. It should be a point of honor and decency to leave them clean.

Finally, when times are bad and it is beyond the powers of improvisation of any officer to relieve them—if, for example, a detachment is stranded during a move through some vagary of the weather—it must be understood that the officer sticks it out with his men.

Health of Troops

If his men keep going sick *it is the duty of the officer to find out why.* More often than not a man who goes sick represents a bad mark against his own administration. If there appears to be something fundamentally wrong with a man's health he should see that the M. O. (Medical Officer) takes appropriate action. A persistently sick man is merely a drag on the work of the battalion and a waste of his instructors' time. Even in an age of motorized and mechanized warfare a soldier must be prepared to use his feet; he must have teeth that will stand up to hard fare, and a body proof against hardship and spells of privation. If his men fail to take the strain, the trouble will have dated back to a period when the officer failed to look to the future.

On the other hand, if the officer watches the men's feet, the water they drink, the food they eat, the clothes they wear, and if there are any little luxuries to be obtained within 50 miles of the Battalion Headquarters, the Quartermaster chases after them, the men of the Battalion will never let the officers down. They will go into action in the spirit of "We have the finest lot of officers in the world and nothing is going to stop us."

Brains On the Job

If a man is fit and contented, an officer should have little difficulty with the problems of training; but behind all the regular routine of training he should remember that he has the general duty of seeing that his men bring their brains to bear on the work to which he put them. It is not enough that they should not be bored—and the first yawn should be regarded by the officer as a devastating criticism of his powers of exposition. He must train them to use their eyes by constantly questioning them on any points of detail with which they should have become acquainted during the exercises; he must crack down on those who dawdle on a skyline; he must deliver fearful warnings to those who meander across an imaginary battleground. He will do well to remember that in the last war the constant cry of "Get down, get down!" was in itself an indictment of the officers who uttered it; and if any of his men show a reluctance to move on their bellies during training he should make them realize that their chances of survival on a modern battlefield will be so slight that their presence will merely serve to encumber the work of the medical and burial service.

He should also remind himself that in this war every soldier is likely to be called upon to acquire something of the deftness and the adaptability of a night bird, and that a townsman will find himself at a serious disadvantage if his training is not modified accordingly.

An officer should insure that his men are given all possible information to take an intelligent interest in the general situation—whether on an imaginary battlefield or under actual war conditions.

The man who, in war, is utterly taken by surprise and rendered incapable of instant action is subject to the worst of all fears—fear of the unknown. A man who recognizes a bomb attack before the bomb bursts has already half mastered the situation.

Thus it may be said that it is an officer's responsibility during training not merely to fit his men for their work on the battlefield but to insure that they shall stand a chance of survival, and live to fight another day. In the average battle with imperfectly trained troops only a small proportion of the casualties can be directly credited to the enemy.

Discipline and Punishments

"Care of men" must not be confused with loving kindness. The officer must discover for himself the border line between considerate treatment and iron discipline. Without discipline a collection of individuals remains nothing more than a collection of individuals and useless in war as a fighting weapon. No man can succeed as an officer unless his men jump to his least word of command. It must be admitted that such power of command is largely a matter of personality. Nevertheless, any officer who endeavors to put into practice the precepts contained in the foregoing paragraphs will have established between himself and his men a subtle bond that will hold even under the strain of battle; he will be able to count upon them to respond to his will.

Will power is a quality of the mind that an officer can cultivate only by a stern resolve to do his job and to keep his head in an emergency, but the test will be immeasurably less severe if he is conscious that his men are all out to help him.

It should be further noted that discipline which depends for its maintenance on punishments is not discipline—that is, the training of the mental, moral and physical powers by instruction and exercise—but a cowed state of submission in authority. Such "discipline" will assuredly crack under the test of battle. The first-rate officer will have but little recourse to punishments. The cause of any punishment must inevitably be a symptom of something wrong in the body of troops under his command; and if he is ceaselessly investigating the men's "mental background," no symptom is likely to take him unawares. In particular the first-rate officer will avoid petty punishments. If he has to punish, he should punish hard—after fair warning. He should himself conform to the high standard of discipline he sets his men. When he returns a salute he should use his hand and not his stick, and if he has a cigarette in his mouth he should first remove it.

Morale

Every point of conduct discussed in the preceding paragraphs is ultimately directed to the question of morale. Good morale is the first of the soldierly qualities—as it has always proved to be the final arbitrament in war.

To the extent that the points discussed can be reduced to a simple everyday routine on the part of the officer and the constant and patient exercise of quite ordinary virtues, morale can be instilled into fighting troops; and any officer whose work helps to sustain morale makes a direct contribution to fighting efficiency.

Alternatively, any lack or failure of morale is equally his responsibility. The essential characteristics of the Irish race have suffered neither diminution nor change during the past twenty years; and every officer may take it that, if things go wrong, whether it be a platoon or in some high formation, the fault is with the officers of that platoon or formation, and not with the men.

The officer has all the advantages of education and environment; even in the heart of a campaign he is enabled to enjoy more than a few of the amenities of civilized life; by comparison, the private soldier has to rough it and just stick it out, whatever the minor amenities his officers have been able to secure for him. The officer who is worthy of his rank will never blame his men for any deficiencies in his command.

Finally, it may be observed that local inadequacy of equipment provides no excuse for any failure to implement the advice urgently offered in these paragraphs to those junior officers who today find themselves immediately responsible for the well-being, the training, and the fortunes in war of the Army.

Extrication from Combat: Retreat

BY
MAJOR GENERAL ERWIN ROMMEL, *German Army*

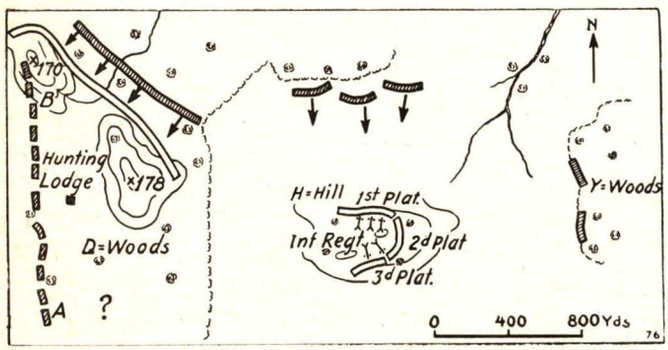
The following article comprises Problem 17 of General Rommel's book Aufgaben für Zug und Kompanie *published in Berlin in 1940. The book is concerned with planning and direction of combat problems, firing in action and map maneuvers; and the object of this particular exercise is extrication from combat, retreat.—THE EDITOR.*

Troop units.—1 rifle company, 1 heavy machine-gun platoon, 1 antitank gun, 1 group of messenger dogs.

Situation.—(Given out on *Hill H:* see Sketch) A Blue attack from the west against an enemy defending himself on the line *A-B* has had little success up to the afternoon of 12 June after many efforts. The casualties are heavy.

The 1st Company of the 1st Infantry Regiment, reinforced by 1 machine-gun platoon and 1 antitank gun, which has penetrated about 2000 yards into the enemy's defensive zone, is in an extremely difficult position by 7 PM. See Sketch!

The 1st platoon, 1 heavy machine-gun section and the antitank gun are engaged in very heavy defensive combat against strong enemy infantry with tanks, who are attacking from the north and whose forward elements have already approached within 400 yards. The enemy troops opposite the 2d platoon are holding *Y Wood* and have hitherto confined themselves to a very active fire. The enemy 600 yards distant in front of the 3d platoon which is also accompanied by the 2d heavy machine-gun section, does not make himself very conspicuous.



The adjacent units on the right and left are separated from the 3d platoon by a gap. They were still in touch with one another an hour before in *D Wood.*

The open terrain between the company and *D Wood* is being swept by the fire of the enemy machine gun farther north.

At 6:30 PM, the company commander had reported the capture of *Hill H* to the battalion and had urgently requested support from the other elements of the latter as well as a supply of ammunition and material for use in close combat.

The following written order from the battalion has just been delivered by a messenger dog:

Battalion Command Post, Hunting Lodge,
D Wood
6:50 PM, 12 June

To the reinforced 1st Company:

The 1st Battalion is holding *Hills 178* and *170* in *D Wood* against strong enemy counterattacks from the north and northeast. It cannot be supported by the 1st Company at present. The company will withdraw to the southern slope of *Hill 178.*

"X."

The company hears a *loud noise of battle* (shell and mine explosions, continuous machine-gun fire) coming from a northwesterly direction.

Many enemy planes are circling about *in the air.* Our own aviators cannot be seen at the time.

Condition of troops.—The troops are in a determined, reliable mood in spite of great deprivations and hard fighting. Casualties so far are 25 percent.