

Ethics and Leadership Responsibility

The Army as a Spiritual School

by William Barlow

The Army, according to Archbishop Anthony Bloom, is perfect monasticism. If so, the Guards Depot may perhaps claim to have offered the finest monastic training in the world.

This may seem an odd way of looking at it, but I am sure it comes nearer the truth than the silly, superficial view some have of Guards discipline. What makes it monastic, however, is not so much the measure of obedience called for as the extent of what it is possible for a man to give. For one of the lessons of living in a severely disciplined environment, where it would appear all are answerable to the same extent all of the time, is that much can still be held back whilst still fully obeying orders. In that respect, the level of experience varies immensely between individuals, even within the same action under the same order. This makes the sweeping generalizations about the military life which its detractors are fond of making, ridiculous. It is indeed possible to hide behind the security the Army offers. It is also possible to discover unsurpassed opportunities for personal growth and emergence which put men on their feet in no uncertain terms. As much as any monastic discipline --- and more than most perhaps --- the Army can offer a "royal road" to crucial truths about man in relation to the world and his fellow men.

Thomas Merton was highly applauded for discovering, after twenty years or more of monastic life, that "it is a glorious thing to realise one is a member of the human race" as though this were a vindication of monasticism and the summit of his journey towards Christian maturity. Yet, it is precisely this kind of truth which soldiers have the chance of learning, a good deal more quickly than most, perhaps, and certainly without the benefit --- if benefit it be --- of solitude. This I hope to show.

I knew the Guards would be tough but what I had not reckoned with were the sternly ascetical standards to which their drill bore witness. I use the word deliberately. I can think of no other which so fittingly describes the hardship which life as a Guardsman entailed. It consisted in a ruthless demand that standards be met which were utterly incompatible with anything that was not sober and functional. That is very exacting indeed.

I once asked a friend who had been there, what he felt was particularly hard about the Guards Depot. He considered this for a while, then said, "it was all hard." At first, I didn't think much of this reply, but then I saw it was exactly right, because things can only be "all hard" where the standard is such as to be applicable in every conceivable situation. For this to be true, the first thing that has to go is called "bullshit." In this connection my formal introduction to the Depot is instructive. I had arrived still wearing the insignia of my previous regiment. It was dark, too dark to get a feel for the place. The square was naturally deserted and I couldn't see it anyhow, whilst the distant lights of the barrack blocks told me nothing of the life being lived within them.

The Guard Commander, a Scots Guardsman, was impressive -- though rather young, I thought, to have three stripes on his arm --- and civilized, and I was spared the usual reception of being hounded down the drive. Instead, I was quietly taken to the Irish Guards Mess Room for a meal, before being dumped on the most junior squad who didn't know what to make of me.

The following morning I was sent for by the Company Sergeant Major. Since the Irish Guards lived in a remote part of the barracks, far from the parade ground, I heard and saw little to remind me that I was in the most notorious training establishment in the Army. That, I felt sure, was bound to come when I met the Company Sergeant Major whom I found in the Company Office. He was in drill order, standing before a stove warming his backside with one hand in his pocket, the other holding a mug of tea. His hat was on the back of his head and he spoke out of the corner of his mouth which had a cigarette dangling from it. "Ah, there you are" he said, coughing as he unintentionally inhaled. "Relax boy, relax. We don't believe in bullshit."

A year later, by which time I had known him long enough to realize he was one of the Regiment's many characters, I heard him make the same point in rather different circumstances. We were in Jordan, on detachment from our battalion which was stationed in the Canal Zone. Although it had been normal for one company of infantry to make up the Garrison at Akaba --- "Q" Force, as it was known --- we had gone there in exceptional circumstances following the dismissal of Glubb Pasha from command of the Arab Legion, by King Hussein. This had brought the threat of instability into the area and we had gone up to deal with any trouble that might break out. Despite the uncertain situation, we lived a relaxed life, following normal routine. Then, one day we were all summoned to a briefing by the Company Commander. He had been in the Guards Parachute Company and had the reputation of being a hard nut, eager for a scrap. He was not old enough to have been in the War but he had seen some form of action, possibly in Palestine. Speaking slowly and deliberately he put us in the picture. Glubb Pasha had been kicked out unexpectedly and there was a real risk of insurrection in the ranks of the Arab Legion. There were those who might not be slow to take advantage of this. Firstly, the Egyptians, who were hostile to us, especially now that we were on the verge of withdrawal from the Canal Zone. Then, the Israelies, whom we had to regard as possible enemies in the circumstances. Finally, and most serious of all, there were the Saudi Arabians who were said to be grouping above Akaba, ready to swoop down on us. It was thought there might be as many as 10,000 of them. There were only 60 of us, plus a bagpiper, and we were virtually surrounded. Behind us was the sea; there was no way out and we could not expect to be relieved. I was given a Bren gun and told to cover an approach to the Camp. One Guardsman was given charge of the Company Colour. Finally, the Company Commander became particularly serious. "I don't think I need tell you," he said, "that there can be no question that we shall fight in the highest traditions of this Regiment. There will be no withdrawal, no relief, and no surrender. We shall fight to the last man and the last round." He paused to let this sink in, then, turning to the CSM, who had been decorated for gallantry whilst serving with the Guards Armoured Division, he said "Company Sergeant Major, is there anything you would wish to add?"

"Thank you, Sir," said the CSM out of the corner of his mouth and with no less serious a tone of voice. "There's just one thing. Anyone who wants to go swimming, parade at the Company Office at 1400 hours."

The Guards, I discovered, had very definite ideas as to what was and was not bullshit. Where turnout was concerned, they were not prepared to leave it to the discretion or the lack of it, of the individual. What was real to others, to the Guards was folly; what was pretty to look at, irrelevant. This made it difficult, at first, to perceive the excellence of their standards, which were in sharp contrast to the excesses that National Service allowed misguided people to go to and then set as a standard for others. In the worst cases these could be very weird indeed and whilst they may have been due to a desire to be smart, they nevertheless represented a personal taste not even remotely connected with soldiering, more often than not. In the Guards, on the other hand, the reason that something had to be cleaned, polished or pressed never lost sight of the fact that it was only in so doing that equipment remained serviceable. The standard, therefore, had its origin in the corporate and accumulated experience of the regiment in its everyday existence whilst the methods used to achieve it were the result of a know-how passed on from generation to generation. A great deal of common sense was involved. The factors provided a solid basis from which to work. They also set up a guarantee against subordinating standards either to personal whim or public opinion so that there was an integrity about the final product by no means unconnected with the discipline for which they were justly famous. Theirs was standard which, even if it had to be imposed on the recruit, was neither arbitrary nor yet totally objective. It was not impersonal either, even though accepting it might, and invariably did, mean the annihilation of individual taste. Behind every demand made there lay a question: "Does it make sense? Is it necessary? What are you aiming for?" The abiding requirement, a stripping down to essentials, was, at one and the same time, a chastisement and an invitation to look again, not only at the thing being cleaned, but at the one who was to wear it. At the heart of everything lay a simple directive: To embrace sobriety, and by the laying aside of all exaggeration, fantasy and frills, to arrive at a right view of oneself.

It says much for the soundness of this approach that the responsibility for this educative process lay, after all, with one person, which is not a contradiction of what I earlier said about not leaving things to the individual. In the Guards, each squad was allotted a Barrack Room Trained Soldier. He was usually an old soldier, with long experience of battalion life who lived in with the recruits. This was a marvelous device, for it enabled the recruits to see what was required of them embodied in a man to whom it was second nature and to associate high standards with everyday routine rather than special occasions.

The Trained Soldier's role, however, was not a passive one. He was responsible to the squad instructor and answerable for the squad down to the smallest detail of their lives. His power over them was absolute. Not even the Commandant would dare to step in and contradict anything the Trained Soldier did where it could be seen to be within his province. The confidence invested in him which was, by extension, a confidence in the system, was enormous, for he could easily undo all the good done on the barrack square. By allowing a slack or relaxed atmosphere to prevail, or by tolerating familiarity, he could destroy a squad. Without rank himself, living alongside the recruits, subject to the same discipline and certainly no less human, it was easily done, and might have happened more often but for the fact that even in his isolation he did not function as an individual. His *raison d'être* lay outside himself, though he was very much a part of it, and therein lay the secret of his stability, unswerving standards and authority.

We lived like monks around a master, under a scheme which was entirely consistent with the criteria from which standards were derived. Good Trained Soldiers, moreover, were always stern taskmasters, far too experienced and down to earth to believe that the highest standards could be achieved easily or by example only. Immense scope was provided by the system for making life hard, and considerable pressure could be brought to bear upon us using the simplest methods. The most common was the total deprivation of time to oneself. Occasionally, silly things did happen, as was inevitable where men had absolute power over others, but these almost invariably originated in the drill staff, who were younger than the Trained Soldiers. Such irregularities were always due to false ideas as to what it means to be tough and to

immature minds. Nor was there anything manly about them. Life in the Barrack Room, on the other hand, was consistently wearing, inescapable and absolutely uncompromising. It tested not only the recruit but the Trained Soldier himself because of the sustained nature of the hardship involved. This was real indeed, and in its unrelentingness earned for the Depot the reputation of being "a little Sparta." Few can have enjoyed it at the time. None is likely to forget it. But there must be more than a few who realize now that it was a significant experience to have had, perhaps the most memorable of their lives.

Perhaps we should leave it to a Trained Soldier to tell us why, for it must not be imagined that the finer points of an experience are lost on uneducated people. The reverse can be true. My own Trained Soldier was a quiet Irishman who never raised his voice and had little to say that was not to the point. One day, he called us together to tell us just what that point was. "You all think you are here for to learn how to polish a pair of boots. Well, you are wrong. It don't take twelve weeks to learn how to do that. Or perhaps you think you are here for learn how to say, 'Yes, Sir, No, Sir, Three bags full, Sir.' Well, you are wrong, for that won't make you Guardsmen. So what are you here for then? Well, I'll tell you. You are all here for to learn to fluff to yourself, that's what. To fluff to yourself. Get it?" We didn't, so he went on. "Since you don't know what the word means and I'm not surprised one bit by that, I'll tell you. It means coming to your senses. Waking up. Stopping daydreaming and living in the real world. Standing on your own two feet and being responsible. Answering for yourselves and knowing what you are supposed to be doing and where you are going. That's what it means. Now get back to your beds and start bloody fluffing." It was a message remarkably consistent with what the Company Sergeant Major had told me.

The other primary means of getting men to fluff to themselves was, of course, the Barrack Square and a recruit spent a lot of time on it. Such was the reputation the Guards had for drill, however, that it was easy not to see the vital relationship between what happened there and the Barrack Room. The reputation was undoubtedly deserved but all too often expressed in terms and popular images were inappropriate and

would certainly have been disowned at the Depot. For here again the cult of superficiality and show for its own sake, so much in evidence elsewhere were, in their eyes, no substitute for the solid and proven doctrine which lay behind their devotion to drill and which found its most succinct statement in the preamble to the Drill Book. There it was confidently asserted that the foundation of discipline in battle is based on drill has been proven again and again. In the Guards this was an unquestioned assumption which they left to others to substantiate, slyly confident that when they did, they would most likely have the Guards Division in mind. They weren't wrong. Writing about his experiences in the Great War, Robert Graves had spoken of his problems with the Canadians who had complained about being required to do drill. They said they had come to France to fight, and not to get ready for Buckingham Palace Guard. In reply, Graves told them that he had met up with three types of troops: those with guts who could not drill; those good at drill but with no guts and those who had guts and could drill well. For some reason he did not understand, and didn't want to, these last fought best of all. Finally, he silenced them by saying that when they could fight as well as the Guards, they could stop drilling. Then there had been a letter in the press making fun of the Guards for being late in getting a new rifle, the implication being that they were not fighting soldiers. This prompted a splendid reply from a man who signed himself as an "ex-German soldier." "I would rather fight a battalion of men armed to the teeth than have to face a company of Guardsman brandishing any rifle and bayonet."

This, however, was not the kind of evidence one heard advanced very often. For the Guards it was too obvious to need stating whilst elsewhere, not least where hardly any drill was done at all, a ridiculous mystique had been allowed to develop concerning the barrack square which was accorded the treatment usually reserved for consecrated ground, with no one daring to set foot on it except on duty. In the Guards, no such nonsense existed and outsiders would have been astonished to see, not only that men crossed it in off-duty hours with impunity, but even smoking as they did so.

It was a different matter when it was in use. That was an awesome sight indeed. At any one time there might be as many as a thousand recruits

on it, in squads of twenty-five or so, each under its own instructor and all shouting at once. Men marched as though their feet were on fire, at incredible speeds in confined spaces, without colliding, thanks to the expertise of the drill staff who pursued them like yapping dogs, barking orders one after another so that a repertoire of movements was gone through with the squad hardly leaving its own ground. It was a considerable art and could be used to show off, to punish or to loosen up. In the early stages of training it was the recognized means of breaking a squad in. By confusing the mind and making demands upon the body which were impossible to fulfill unless it were freed to behave naturally, the right foundation for drill and much else perhaps was laid. For there was little point to the ascetical standard insisted upon in the Barrack Room if a similar stripping away of false images as to what drill was about did not also occur. And, as it happens, the end result was the same.

Left to themselves, men would drill as though they were strangers to their own bodies, like split personalities, uncoordinated and grotesque. This was because nearly everyone who came into the Depot from civilian life brought with him the tortuous notion that, to drill smartly, one had to restrict and frustrate the natural action of the body. Only then, they seemed to think, was the proper image of the disciplined soldier adequately conveyed. It was precisely this false notion that the Guards training sought to destroy, and did so most effectively. Through it, men came to inhabit and use their bodies less self-consciously, with an economy of movement that was the equivalent of the stripping down to essentials which being well-turned out entailed. Sobriety, indeed, was as important to the Barrack Square as to the Barrack Room. One could discern at the heart of their drill, as of their turnout, a principle of identity --- a right view of self --- which made of both a statement of what they were so totally revealing that, like a parable, one could see yet not perceive. It was blindness, moreover, which led people to see precision in the wrong terms, leading not only to frivolousness and superficiality, but ends which were actually inimical to drill, properly understood. For even if a squad avoided being made to look like a dancing troupe, it could still fall foul of the problem which precision, as an end in itself, always gave rise to.

"Bullshit baffles brains" was the old saying. Indeed it does, no less so on the barrack square than in the barrack room, and it was easy to get carried away, as many do, at the prospect or sight of a squad of men acting in perfect unison without appreciating the possible implications. They could be profound. Far from enhancing a squad's performance, mere perfect unison could diminish it. There is a mundaneness about a standard which is uniformly interpreted and enforced as to be attainable by all. It reduces a squad to anonymity, making them interchangeable and nameless, for all the difference it makes. In the Guards, this never happened. Their drill was always definitive, in the sense of being true to what they were, and therefore always precise even though mistakes might be made.

The third means of getting men to come to their senses in the Guards Depot lay in making them accountable, to the greatest extent possible, to the standard required. The degree of accountability, often thought absurd by others, was indeed high, and in order to enforce it, the Guards worked to a system all of their own. Instead of Army Forms on which to record infringements of discipline and bring men to justice before a superior officer, they used Small Report Books. These were without any official standing and could be used against a man to any extent, without detriment to his career, since the information recorded in them was not added to his record sheet. In its implementation this system appeared highly exaggerated, because of its frequent use, and the extraordinary nature of the scenes it incurred. It gave rise to many stories that are not lost in the telling.

'Sergeant O'Connell, take Murphy's name.' 'Murphy's on leave, Sir.'
'Then take the name of the man standing next to him. Wake up!'

It also aroused much criticism from outsiders. For it was easy to imagine that all perspective had been lost when men were called upon to answer for the smallest thing and to feel amply justified in thinking that the Barrack Square thrived on pettiness. What was all the shouting about, it was asked, if not ignorance, stupidity, immaturity and bull?

By listening to what was said, one could find out. Quite easily, in fact, for there was one expression constantly in use, which gave the game away. It was "Take his name." Whereas in the rest of the Army, men

were "put on a charge" in the Guards they "lost their name." Failure to measure up to the standard required therefore was interpreted as a loss of identity, which was further evidence against the facile assumption that the training of a Guardsman was aimed at producing anonymity.

The reverse was true. In the Guards Depot mens' names were trumpeted around the Barrack Square as though the Roll were being called on Judgment Day, with unusual clarity, to be followed immediately by a recital of their misdeeds, precisely stated, for as with turnout, so with speech: slovenliness was not tolerated. The possible exception was the Welsh Guards. There it was enough to mention a man's last two numbers for it to be known that it was Jones and not Evans 88 that was meant. Otherwise, the ritual was the same.

'Company Sergeant Major, take the name of the man standing slightly to the rear of the left-hand man of the centre rank of the leading squad of Number 5 Company. He seems to be lost.'

'Got him, Sir. O'Reilly, missing from his place of employment.'

As a method of singling a man out, especially on big parades, it worked like a grid reference and was no less infallible. One stood as under a spotlight, suddenly revealed, to be immediately identified, then rendered nameless, as though to make the point that a man became a nobody when separated from the group rather than the other way around. To anyone who understood the ramifications of discipline, this was true.

One learnt the loss could be in personal and regimental terms. Something which impressed me enormously as a recruit, was the ruling concerning the wearing of medal ribbons. Before one started a second row, the first had to be filled. To us, that meant no second row unless a man had more than five medals. However, it often happened that men who came to us from other units with five ribbons up often wore them in two rows. This was not approved of. It was considered immodest and unnecessary, and offenders were very quickly told to get their jackets into the tailor's shop to have it put right. They also lost their names.

'Take that man's name, Company Sergeant Major. If he says it's Montgomery, don't believe him.'

Another example comes to mind, a good one I think, of the recruit whose capstar had worn smooth through being polished so much. It was impossible to tell from it which regiment he was in.

'Drill Sergeant, this man appears to be incognito,' the inspecting officer had observed. 'Take his name, assuming he has one.'

This made enormous sense, being entirely consistent with the aims of the Barrack Square and Barrack Room. It was impressive for the same reason. Men might indeed shout and scream, appearing to make mountains out of molehills, but in reality this was their way of maintaining perspective. It was ultimately a very sobering thing to be held continually accountable, and by making men so in small things, considerable scope was given to those in authority to show leniency in big things. For, once the notion of being personally accountable became ingrained, so the objective nature of the standard asserted itself, making discipline less vulnerable to the effects of infringement and less rigid in its application. Certainty played a great part in the training of a Guardsman, but also freedom. Because men knew at all times where they stood, the means existed for establishing an inner confidence. This, like a flower, could be cultivated, until the consistency of the standards, with their clear-cut, no nonsense nature based on common sense, found their counterpart in a personal integrity where each soldier learnt to answer for himself, not as a victim of the system necessarily, but manfully, with discretion and in the service of ends greater than himself.

There can be no doubt that this was an ascetic training. Its great strength was that it insisted upon a principle of identity, a right view of self, as being at the heart of discipline, a conclusion arrived at, not through theorizing, but through actual experience. It was a training based upon sobriety of standards, involving a continual stripping away of images, the aim being, always, to get at the true image of man.

This was of the utmost importance because it establishes the essential link between the Soldier and Civilian, the Army and Society, which is that we are all human. The need to realize this and to respect it is imperative. Not for one moment should the Army or Society allow that

insight to become a casualty through any kind of diversion to dishonorable or false ends.

If it is true that the Army is a spiritual school, there must be some kind of graduation. This is something which carries enormous possibilities because a spiritual way, once taken, begins to beat its own path which must be followed at no matter what cost. Meanwhile, this process of growth and personal emergence always leads to significant changes in how one sees the Army, Society and one's fellow men. It is an experience which brings a new perspective to the whole of life. Those who choose to remain soldiers will be the guarantors of an army which no society need fear, whilst society itself will always be enriched by those who, having arrived at a right view of self, remain true to it.