

LEARNING TO BE SOLDIERS

When Germany's soldiers went back home after the war, they felt betrayed. They felt a 'stab in the back'. All that they had fought for, all that they had given their energy to, all that they had hoped for did not happen as they saw their country in ruins.(Class discussions). A country's soldiers feeling betrayed by their own people conveys what might have gone into this fight. It conveys that they had put in a lot of effort which was wasted. Learning to be a soldier requires much more than an act of bravery. It demands much more than just strength and skill.

By 1914, World War One was soon seen as inevitable. Tensions in the European region led to everyone anticipating a war. During this long, pre-war time span of anticipation, each economy was undergoing shifts in industry, military, and the home front. Men were being enlisted, recruited, and trained. There was immense effort put towards training men for months and years. Even though each nation had its own issues and deficiencies which led to poor implementation of plans, there was a lot of learning that did take place for men before the war. In Germany, much to the concern of Britain and France, the military leaders had spent years building up their army, practicing in open fields, requiring mandatory training, and developing advanced weaponry.(Hart, 2013, Page 3). German men, thus, got vigorous training and remarkably constructed their army. A rising empire with a strong-armed force was probably why their men were viewed as inhumane and dangerous. In the United States, it was for the first time that they had established a uniform training program.(Keene, page 35). They wanted to do more than just train soldiers. John J. Pershing, commander of the American Expeditionary Forces, wanted to match up to what Germany had achieved militarily, not make the mistakes that France made, and form highly trained and highly effective soldiers.(Liam Doherty, discussion post).

The '*Rapid Training of a Company for War*' book, written by A. P. Birchall, gives us an idea about what was included in these trainings for men¹. It was suggested that practical work should be combined with lectures and explanations, there must be a syllabus, elementary drills and exercises, Care of Arms, knowing parts of a rifle, firing positions, and advanced drills. Additionally, learning signals, how to take orders and transfer them, and how to take advantage of cover and camouflage were some supplemental essentials. Other manuals had separate sections for drafting attack and defense positions for the armies also. Another important element was the process of formulating war strategies like the Schlieffen Plan in Germany. Even though, pre-war tactics didn't prove very useful in breaking the stalemate, men who were in on the planning could learn a lot about the approaches and strategies behind them. Hence, regardless of which nation they came from, men knew the basics of being a soldier.

There were, however, much more important and vital lessons hidden in their experiences in the training camps, in the journeys to the front, and in the trenches, which they were unknowingly grasping. The first example is the United States army which observed a disarray in the camps. Men trickled into camps unevenly, there were shortages of barracks and supplies, new arrivals were staggered, construction was still in progress, and training discrepancies arose within divisions.(Keene, page 37). There was knowledge concealed in this state of confusion. This is because chaos and confusion are exactly what the soldiers faced in the trenches. Whether it is through the stalemate, the 'live and let live' approach, the very few active sectors of combat, or the changes in the orders from high command, men had to learn how to function in a situation of uncertainty and disorientation. Secondly, they had boxing as a healthy diversion which contributed a lot to the training. It invoked a feeling among men that this was their 'ultimate test of manhood'. It fostered

¹ *Rapid Training of a Company for War*, AP Birchall, Adam Matthew, The First World War, https://www-firstworldwar-amdigital-co-uk.du.idm.oclc.org/Documents/Details/IWM_04_41_02_42_3, pages 24-27, accessed on June 6, 2021

courage, virility, self-reliance, and self-control.(Keene, page 41). Boxing also kept them physically healthy and active. This could be a starting point for the transformation from a man to a soldier. The third factor which helped in training was the atmosphere of the training camps. For the US, they had a ‘closed institutional environment’ to separate the men from their previous lives and make them focus on what they were supposed to learn. This helps foster a sense of team and build comradeship among them. While in a fight, a soldier has only his companions around him. Hence, it is crucial for them to know each other and understand themselves as one group.

Sergeant Charles R. Blatt voiced his concerns over the usefulness of elementary drills being carried out repeatedly. He felt they were a waste of time. (Keene, page 38). This was evident in the front when the soldiers realized that the ‘individualized’ focus came at the expense of other skills needed. Rarely were there any joint exercises, coordinated efforts, and the training doctrine also proved imperfect. It was not just the quality of training which caused problems, it was also the quantity. ‘*The Handbook of the French Army*’ gives evidence for the fact that France thought this was a short war and already had sufficient resources². But they lacked enough training. Men only underwent two trainings of 23 and 17 days, some had only one training of 19 days.

Such scenarios led to many soldiers feeling that the “real education” took place on the battlefields, in the trenches. (Keene, page 42). Men learned from one another. They took “classes” away from the supervisors and took advice from each other on what to expect during combat. These were the only sources of knowledge for some men, who were untrained and found themselves on the front lines or for volunteers who received very little help and guidance. Combat veterans also became a source of insightful advice. Cultural customs inherent in the trenches taught the men a lot of things as well. This process of learning from others is actually natural. Sometimes just observations and

² *The Handbook of the French Army*, 1914, Adam Matthew, The First World War, https://www-firstworldwar-amdigital-co-uk.du.idm.oclc.org/Documents/Details/TNA_WO_33_2829, accessed on June 5, 2021

conversations help. It is also possible to be inspired by those around you. Maybe the zeal that soldiers had, came from seeing the determination and resolve that Belgian soldiers showed at Liège.

It is interesting to note that the soldiers were learning from themselves as well. Keene talks about how the spirit and morale of the soldiers mattered a lot. Sir John Robertson also said that grit, morale, or the human factor would decide the war and not matériel.(Ferguson, 1998, page 339). This is why factors like how the men view themselves, how they interact with civilians, what their attitude is towards each other, personal values like confidence and beliefs helped men become the kind of soldiers they wanted to. A great example of the “self-teaching” is observed in the Ardennes Offensive, where pre-war tactics were not being used. (Hart, 2013, page 41). It was just plain slaughter. It was one of the deadliest and bloodiest days of the war made worse with bad terrain and fog. The armies were suffering, soldiers were lost mentally and physically. Such experiences might harden them and anger them but, it does prove beneficial for the soldiers to know the next best move to make, study the enemy’s tactics, and plan how they can fight better.

Drawing from Tony Ashworth’s book *‘Trench Warfare: The Live and Let Live System’* and class discussions, planning war tactics is one thing but what the soldiers actually do on the front lines is entirely their call. They had a different way of behaving. They wanted to stay alive which is probably why they became defensive and stopped attacking one another around December of 1914. When they went back home for leave, Ferguson mentions, soldiers realized the depth of their friendships formed with others. When they went back to the front after their leave, they had a strong resolve to not let each other down. These things were determining their traits as to who they were as soldiers – helpful, brotherhood, warm-hearted, sympathetic, and at the same time helpless for not being able to show their compassion openly.

Their actions were also influenced by what it meant to be a ‘man’ in those days. Men had a tendency to be innately aggressive, independent, and instinctual. Some said war was a highly attractive

activity for which there was no substitute, for a Canadian soldier it was the 'greatest adventure of his life'. (Ferguson, page 358). Men acted on impulse and loved danger which explains how there ended up being so many casualties through reckless killing.

Sometimes soldiers' military education depended on the nations they came from. In the United States, the concept of citizen-soldier emerged. They required two things: a man who was willing to die. (Class discussion). What we need to remember is that we can't train someone to be willing to die, it comes from within oneself. US had a lot of confidence in who they were and what they had accomplished. Their confidence boosted the morale of the Allied forces also. On the other hand, French men were driven mostly by their zeal to take revenge from Germans. It also depends on what the high command or military leaders inculcated in the soldiers. The reason the soldiers from AEF were so active and "ready" to attack was because they were told that this was their role. They were supposed to put an end to a meaningless fight. The key training goals included building aggressiveness and making the men feel that they cannot be beaten. They should rather have a resolve to die in honor than to retreat in dishonor. (Keene, page 38).

To conclude, men became soldiers not before the war but rather during the war, over four years. It was a multidimensional phenomenon, an infinity of profound experience. (Ashworth and class discussions). Training was much more than just going to a camp and learning to use rifles. Knowledge and information always came from many directions. They were learning how to cope in that environment from themselves, from other soldiers, from their families, their nations, their opponents, and their leaders. Today, even the simplest of the jobs requires knowledge through experience. So, it is rather obvious that men learned to be soldiers only once they experienced the front.