

Jon Garvey chews the cud in his new regular column



Le cri de corps

Before I was a doctor, I had a job with the Ministry of Agriculture, largely consisting of sorting large numbers of fleas into their respective sexes under general anaesthetic, and assembling them into celibate little communities which were kept in the refrigerator to cool any remaining ardour. Feeling I was destined for greater things, I had already mapped out a career in medicine, and one day found myself in conversation about it with a man I had met in the pub at lunchtime. A very nice man, too—he had already bought me a half of Double Diamond, which I sipped through my adolescent stubble as I told him of my plans.

“Why don’t you get the army to put you through college?” he said. “They’d pay all your expenses, *and* a salary—you’d be a lot better off than you would on a grant.” I admitted that I hadn’t thought of this, but said I had heard somewhere that you had to work in the army once you qualified, which did not seem so attractive. He proceeded to point out the multitudinous opportunities for medical excellence the forces could provide, the chance for travel, the great social life...

“You seem to know a lot about it,” I said, a faint suspicion forming in my mind. “Have you been in the army?”

“I *am* in the army. Sergeant,” he replied, pointing to the lapel badge which I had mistaken for something to do with the Rotary Club.

“Plain clothes branch?” I inquired, my suspicion becoming a terrible conviction.

“Recruiting branch,” he said. “Have another drink!” And at that moment I saw the shilling at the bottom of my glass and fled away to my beloved fleas.

Of course, with the fullness of time I can see the folly of my missed opportunity, although I had never been exactly against a career in the forces. It had simply never occurred to me to put “medicine” in the same mental schema as “soldiers”. Would-be clerics must have the same problem in considering

army chap-laincy as a career. Had I only thought, I would have realised how ideally prepared I had been for such a step by my years of training in that seedbed of the modern professional army and brood chamber of the Sandhurst chap-factory, the Combined Cadet Force.

To tell the truth I had become rather disillusioned with paramilitary organisations by my involvement with the Wolf Cubs, but where I went to school, if one did not enlist, one was doomed to spend Friday afternoons in the “squash mob”, who passed their time in bookbinding and other spineless pursuits which stunted the body and predisposed them to blindness. The crack military unit I joined was quite unlike that of my father’s day. Then it had been called the Officers’ Training Corps and wore the uniform of Boer War times. We, in contrast, wore the uniform of my father’s day, cool in winter, hot in summer, abrasive perennially, and requiring endless maintenance without looking any better at the end of it (“I want you to look IM-MAC-UL-ATE on parade tomorrow, Garvey. IM-MAC-UL-ATE. I want to be able to see my face in those creases!”).

But what we learned of valour in those uniforms! What self-reliance on those field day exercises! We in the signals platoon (far more prestigious than footling first aid) used to carry round old World War II “31” radios, so called because of their weight in kilogrammes. If we should inadvertently sit back while plumbed in to one of these, we became instantly helpless, like a large khaki beetle struggling to right itself. Since nobody ever called upon us to co-ordinate troop movements, most of the officers having become lost already (no need for fragging in the British Army), we used our initiative and tuned in to Radio Caroline.

If my service experience prepared me spiritually for a military career, how much more should the qualifications I acquired meanwhile have smoothed my temporal path! Indeed, I have a recurrent fantasy in which, come the Next Conflict to end All Conflicts, and my call-up papers, I

have just been selected because of my physique and general air of enthusiasm for the Pioneer Corps. But at this point I casually mention my certificate “A”, with special commendation in drill (nothing to it once you realise you must imitate Little Richard singing “Lucille”), my Empire Super Marksman classification, and my certificate “T” in radio theory (What is a volt? What is electricity made of?). A hush fills the crowded church hall, and an awestruck recruiting sergeant phones allied command HQ for instructions while reverently pouring me a Double Diamond...

Like it or not the armed forces are essential to maintaining our way of life. Without them, the fur trade would collapse under the weight of a glut of bearskins. We should have no ex-army revolvers to supply London’s crime rings, nor retired majors to run country guest houses. Worst of all, we should have no old uniforms for rebellious teenagers to wear, and they would all have to dress up as traffic wardens, which would not be at all the same thing.

Even so, there are some people who are simply unsuited to the military life. I remember one SHO colleague—who had joined up as a student when he found he had a pregnant wife and no visible means of support—desperately trying to persuade his superiors to let him relapse into civilian life, and resorting to such subconscious denial mechanisms as falling asleep in trains and ending up in sidings instead of at important interviews with high ranking officers. I suspect that I, too, am irredeemably apart of this non-military dross, despite my meteoric rise to the rank of lance-corporal in my career hitherto.

But perhaps it is not so much a distaste for things martial which has kept me from pursuing my medical career in the services. Rather, it is the nagging feeling that, should the Soviet hordes really start depositing snowy boot marks across Europe, I would feel nothing but frustration at being co-opted into the RAMC to dab calamine on our boys’ radiation burns. I fear I might be more at home lobbing a few H-bombs back eastwards. ■

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