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As SOLDIER Lads MARCH By

ALAN FARRELL

You smug-faced crowds with kindling eye,
Who cheer when soldier lads march by,
Sneak home and pray you'll never know
The hell where youth and laughter go.
—Siegfried Sassoon¹

Hey. I'm dozing through one of the endless seminars we foist off as the "life of the mind" out where I teach. Shafts of afternoon sunlight drifting lazily through the high window. Eerie shadows under the varnished vaults of the library. *I'm in a state of grace.* Through and beyond my revery an intense and voluble young woman is expatiating on Uncle Toby. Remember him from *Tristram Shandy*? The one with the "groin wound," as I think it was nicely called. To this deathless image she adds that of Jake Barnes, who has become a "steer," as a result of what the British name the "unmentionable wound." And now, of course, she reminds us of Nick, the guy from *The Big Chill* who, in a narcotic stupor, must refuse the advances of a female friend, saying: "Did I ever tell you what happened to me in Vietnam?" "This," she summarizes, with the adamantine righteousness of youth and to the ineffable joy of her teacher and coach, "is the legacy of Vietnam: *impotence, sterility, inadequacy.*"

Come on people. Is this debate really going to turn on my little wee-wee?

There is at least some serious suggestion that it is. I can recall posters I saw upon my return assuring me that "Girls Say Yes To Boys Who Say No." A recent, quite sober history of Europe has this to say about war: "Women's ability to bear children may have led to a male need to achieve and create in an area where men were clearly superior to women. No area of human endeavor provides this so fully as...combat. The root...of warfare may be men's need to act in an area in which their superiority to women and necessity to society were paramount."² I don't know about that. I do know, I think, that war as an event and the Army as an institution are tribal things, and as such undelimited by the rationalization recent years have tried to impose on their organization and, I fear, by the rationality you hope to apply to an analysis of them. "The Army," says the French poet Alfred de Vigny, "is a sort of male religion, a cult without symbols or icons, without dogma or priests, or any written laws."³

I am interested in the Army and the Academy. And there is evidence that other people are as well. Listen to this guy, confessing

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publicly in *The New York Times*. The statement is so extraordinary that I cite it at length:

I thank my gods I didn't go to Viet Nam....But I am far more ambivalent about not having served in the armed forces...as I 'survey' friends...who have served I notice something disturbing...they have something we haven't got. It is, to be sure, somewhat vague, but nonetheless real, and can be embraced under several headings: realism, discipline, masculinity...resilience, tenacity, resourcefulness....There is something missing in my generation...It has to do with camaraderie, shared purpose, and self-transcendence.⁴

I am not certain what I got out of the Army. I was an infantryman but no fool; a volunteer, but no patriot; a combatant, but no hero; a vet but no martyr. Yet I was one of *them*. And now I'm one of *you*.

"Think first, fight after. The soldier's art," said Browning. "One draught of earlier, happier sights/Ere fitly I could hope to play my part."⁵ He states, if he does not resolve, the great conundrum of the profession of arms. The fact is that you must think either before or after you fight, because as any combat veteran will tell you: there is no thinking while you fight. Thinking before you fight, we call strategy; thinking after we call mercy. In this way there is no divorce between reason and action, but there is a priority.

As members of the Academy, we look to the light of reason, the comfort of order; we enlist the devices of what we like to call logic against the primal chaos into which things threaten to dissolve if we do not impress upon the random array of objects and events the stamp of intellect. The notions "soldier" and "war," on the other hand, conjure up images at odds with such aspirations: *obedience, cowardice, ritual*. The thought of obedience without the right to question, challenge, modify, accuse, recuse terrifies intellectuals and represents one of the great threats held out by military service; cowardice offers the unsettling possibility that despite our efforts the body might not in the end serve the will; ritual summons up all sorts of somber visions of the state from which we have so laboriously and at such price disengaged ourselves, largely through the ministrations of reason, who now sees herself menaced by a retreat to earlier, darker times and ways.

"Go, Stranger, tell the Lacedaemonians that we lie here obedient to their wishes," says Herodotus. But I say that in *disobedience* is the root of what we mean by a soldier, what we ask of a soldier, that the paradox of the soldier is precisely that his role is conceived in disobedience; that the ultimate loyalty of him whom we send out to represent the multitude is disloyalty to that multitude and a new loyalty forged under the circumstances of his ostracism.

Now, when I say soldier, I mean the one of us who has no stake in the army save under the immediate menace of war, a simple citizen and no professional. The thought of exacting death from citizens as the

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price of the social contract has not made even the greatest and most farsighted of political thinkers blanch. A citizen will fight for the nation. For Plato, at least, "all education and the pursuits of war and peace are to be in common."⁶ Women, too. Plato thought the oligarchy inefficient because it is "incapable of waging war," since "either the [oligarchs] arm the multitude and then are more afraid of them than of the enemy; or, if they do not call them out in the hour of battle, they are oligarchs indeed, few to fight as they are few to rule."⁷ Homer observes quietly that the elders of Troy, "because they are old do not engage in the combat, but talk about it instead."

But the question of individual choice really doesn't come up till the Eighteenth Century, with its national conscriptions. This is the *levée en masse* issued by the French Committee of Public Safety in 1793: "The young men shall fight; the married men shall forge weapons...the women shall make tents and clothes; the children shall make linen into bandages; the old men shall...rouse courage...."⁸ Montesquieu describes obedience in a "moderate monarchy," where the will of the prince comes up against honor (called by Vigny "*la puduer virile*"), which being the guiding principle of the state, in theory at least, cannot really interfere with its welfare, although there are, he says, "necessary modifications to obedience" on account of honor, because honor is "necessarily subject to 'bizarceries', and obedience follows them all."⁹

So in the end the dilemma of selective or suspended obedience to the grander aspirations of a state is imposed not collectively but particularly on a relatively small segment of that state. Yes, but with what expectations? With what consequences? This is SLA Marshall, writing in *Men Against Fire*:

The army cannot unmake man; he comes from a civilization in which aggression, connected with the taking of life, is prohibited and unacceptable. The teaching and ideals of that civilization are against killing....The fear of aggression has been expressed to him so strongly and absorbed by him so deeply and pervadingly...that it is part of the normal man's emotional make-up. This is his greatest handicap when he enters combat.¹⁰

So that obedience to the nation's call is necessarily disobedience to elements which form the social bond in the first place. A fragile and irrational equilibrium.

"Only the cowards come back from a war," writes Jean Giraudoux in *The Trojan War Will Not Take Place*, an ageless and unspoken reproach to returning soldiers.¹¹ The Greeks called him "*rhipsaspis*," or "the guy who throws down his shield." Archilochus, Alcaeus, Horace, not only threw down their shield, but then boasted of the fact. "You can have this shield," says Archilochus, "I'll go find a better one."¹² Cowardice is, of course, the following of one's quite normal and natural instinct to be elsewhere than at the point of impact when the grief comes in despite Reason's enjoinders to stay and do one's duty, whatever that is.

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L-F Céline, a French soldier severely wounded in combat and awarded his nation's highest medal, recounts in his *Voyage to the End of Night*:

You bet I'm a coward! I say no to war and everything about it. I don't deplore it....I don't resign myself to it....I don't cry about it...and if there were nine hundred ninety-five million people who think the other way and me all alone on my side, then they're the ones wrong and I'm still right, cause I'm the only one who knows what I want: to stay alive.¹³

Throwing away one's shield implies an authority of participation, albeit brief. The *rhapsaspis* stayed in the fight until the last minute, at least. He was there and lays claim to the authenticity lent by immediacy. And, as Professor Frye points out, he is, by his act of confession, invulnerable to deflation or insult.¹⁴ He has taken this act upon himself and disarmed, in the twin senses of that word, his adversaries. "My urge downwards," confesses T.E. Lawrence, was "in pursuit of the safety which can't fall further."¹⁵ Céline goes on:

...while this humiliation was under way, I could feel my self-respect slowly leaving me, fading out, abandoning me once and for all, officially so to speak...it was a sweet moment. Since then I have become for all time infinitely light and free....From that day on I have never needed any other weapon....¹⁶

The coward is simply more human, therefore less rational, than his interlocutor, less intimidating than heroes who remind the reader who *he* is, inferior to that observer, not threatening to him, therefore lovable. We like having a coward around. Makes us feel better. Heroes make us uneasy.

Ritual and reintegration. For Northrop Frye, the real sense of the terms "tragic" and "comic" is the degree to which a protagonist or hero is successfully or unsuccessfully reintegrated into the circle of society at drama's end. What happens to a citizen-soldier outside the social circle? What does the hierophant within the new and ritual circle stake out as the limit of his conduct? We have seen that the fundamental premise of his service, his "life-sentence," as one writer has said,¹⁷ is an exceptional license to disobey the laws and taboos of his world, for a time. But he acquires new ones, and a new hieratic structure, and a new ontology, even a new rhetorical period to intone.

In the simplified social order of the Army, one's identity is construed by one's function, inversely to all the tenets of what I guess we would call existential ideology: one does not do on account of one's nature; one does not do in order to fabricate one's nature; one does what an 11-Bravo does, and no more. It must be so, because outside what 11-Bravos do is what 13-Alphas do and what 05-Charlies do, and on and on. One lives within a circumscribed and sacrosanct circle, the bounds of which countless generations of proselytes have tested and probed and

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found solid: in the center, safely, one is FD, "For Duty." All along the periphery are the various states which constitute exemption from that condition: AWOL, Absent without Leave; LBJ, Long Binh Jail; MIA, WIA, CIA, or KIA, which we called in Vietnam TYT, "Take Your Time"; FUO, Fever Unknown Origin, Malaria; NSU, Non Specific Urethritis, also called Clap.

The business of tampering with individual identity, however, is a deeply complex business. Most men come to the Army in adolescence, when vague stirrings and yearnings for identity, atonement with Father, and all that Freudian doo-wop are a freshly if thinly-lacquered fixture of the psyche. And it is in the Army that we all saw our first *Man*: virile, commanding, physical, scarred. Not at all like that broken, sagging, menopausal specter who limped back into our family living room after each day at work. In the Army, your identity is written not on your soul but on your shirt. Where you have been—and therefore what you are—is sewn across your chest, for everyone to see. Not medals; no one ever sees those in the Army, but what we call rightly or not "scare badges," signs of pains endured, like the ritual scarification or passage rites in primal cultures. Not stripes, which convey only temporal authority and often represent, as such signs do in our world, only longevity. Pathfinder, HALO, SCUBA, Master Parachutist, CIB, Ranger. Nobody ever said "Ooooooooooh" to my Phi Bet' key. And I never would have considered risking my life to earn one. But I sure did risk it collecting my scare badges. And was as surprised to find myself doing it as you might be. And no more susceptible to the game than you. How many of you can truly say that in your moment of ontological disarray, as Sartre called it, and the occasion presenting itself to fill that existential void with something, you would not have seized it? "I am..." "I am..." "I am...a Marine." "I am...a Paratrooper." And in belonging to that group one inherits the collective virtue—and vice—of the group.

Now in this non-rational universe, there is no need for persuasion, since force and authority are virtually absolute. That makes for changes even so subtle as the periodicity, the rhythm of language. Language is conservative in the trade of arms: men wear "trousers"; a hat is a "cover"; tardiness or absence is "failure to repair." There is a technical fidelity, an ageless respect for the objects within the ritual amphitheater, which are few enough: "The pistol, US, caliber .45, Model of 1911, A1 modification, is a magazine fed, recoil-actuated, self-loading sidearm"; "ventral parachute pack opening spring band secured to dress-maker's eyelet." And on and on. Notice that none of the hypotactic apparatus of what we should call conventional language appears: no subordination, no attenuation, none of the devices of persuasive speech. No need. The cadence is that of command with its rising preparatory intonation—"Attennnnnnnnn..."—and its falling tonality of execution—"shun," spelled, by-the-by, "s-h-u-n" in FM 22-5, the Army manual for Drill and Ceremonies.

Yet, given that initial exemption from the social contract, how easily can a soldier's behavior be reprogrammed to order, and how

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strictly can it be limited? That is the paradox of military service: that in separating members of the society from the collective corpus toward the common good, the social order alienates those same members, sometimes permanently. It is the constant tension, the paradox of one's adherence and yet one's separation which transports all issues related to it into an arena other than rational, since the goal in war is to impose will on events and objects. It has long been known that reason is no foil to the momentum of events or the ineluctability of physical law, but that sheer human pertinacity, doggedness, *will*, in short can in fact overcome inevitability. Combat is will over geometry, and will, I tell you, is not rational. At least not as you understand it. But the ritual separation renders reintegration of the divorced member difficult and the maintenance of contact otherwise improbable.

If the soldier is isolated, by class or caste, through a disenfranchisement from the moral imperatives of his conditioning, by the nature of his endurance in battle, he is nonetheless absorbed into another and smaller world, a microcosm, a community of his peers, his "buddies," that "mysterious fraternity born out of smoke and danger of death,"¹⁸ and for whom he fabricates bonds of remarkable durability. This is Erich Fromm, speaking of that group:

The narcissistic image of one's own group is raised to its highest point, while the devaluation of the opposing group sinks to its lowest. One's own group becomes a defender of human dignity, decency, morality, and right. Devilish qualities are ascribed to the other. It is treacherous, ruthless, and basically inhuman.¹⁹

But this group psychology does not direct itself wholly at the adversary in battle; it directs itself at the citizens which do not "share...agonies" which they regard with "callous complacency" and which "they do not have sufficient imagination to realize."²⁰ Or understand. These others remain outside the circle. Paul Fussell has said that since 1945 he has thought of himself as a "pissed-off infantryman,"²¹ disdainful of those who were not ritually initiated into the circle. And like all outsiders, this constituency fears and scorns what may lie inside. A classic example of exiles having formed a world from which they now exclude their former caste-mates. This is Alfred de Vigny, a soldier in the Nineteenth Century, speaking of the "modern" army of his time:

[It]...is...a body separated from the great body of the nation, like the body of an infant, or at least infantile in its intelligence, and forbidden to grow up. The modern Army, when there is no war, becomes ashamed of itself and cannot decide what it is or what it should do...the soldier is a disreputable hero, victim and executioner, scapegoat sacrificed to and for his people, a martyr at once ferocious and humble....²²

The precarious imposture of bringing order to events has never really appealed to the Academy. The elusive randomness of actual

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reality presents a test to the grandest schemes which can throw them into appalling confusion and disorder. The nightmare of reason. And in no enterprise is power more nakedly menacing or reason so thoroughly at risk than war. Curiously enough, as at least one commentator has pointed out, the soldier's art may yet be the purest application of reason:

The soldier must engage in ethical action. He must willfully carry out the obligations, and he must know why it binds. The soldier must exercise ethical judgment. He is engaged in the rational action of discerning why one obligation binds more than another. The last refuge of the bureaucrat is to execute rules as a means of escaping responsibility...[the soldier] can never escape responsibility for his judgments.²³

So...

Let's run Old Glory
To the top of the pole;
And we'll all re-enlist
...in a pig's ass-hole.²⁴

¹ Rupert Hart-Davis, ed., *The Poems of Siegfried Sassoon* (London: Faber & Faber) 1983: 119.

² Bonnie S. Anderson and Judith P. Zinsser, *A History of Our Own* (New York: Harper & Row) 1983: 13.

³ Alfred de Vigny, *Servitude et grandeur militaires* (Paris: Gallimard) 1950 : 236. Translation my own.

⁵ Robert Browning, "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came," found in J.H. Buckley and G.B. Woods, eds., *Poetry of the Victorian Period* (Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman) 1955: 253.

⁶ Scott Buchanan, translator, *Plato* (New York: Viking) 1948: 585.

⁷ *Ibid*: 597

⁸ Walter Mills, *Of Arms and Men* (New York: Putnam): 47.

⁹ Vigny: 76.

¹⁰ S.L.A. Marshal *Men Against Fire* (Gloucester: Peter Smith) 1978: 13.

¹¹ Jean Giraudoux, *La Guerre de Troie Naura pas lieu [The Trojan War Will Not Take Place*, sometimes and wickedly translated as *Tiger at the Gates*] (Grasset: Paris) 1935: 35. Translation my own.

¹² HD Rankin, *Archilochus of Paros* (Park Ridge, NJ: Noyes Press) 1977: 42.

¹³ L-F Celine, *Voyage au bout de la nuit* (Paris: Gallimard) 1952: 88.

¹⁴ Northrop Fry, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press) 1957: 68.

¹⁵ TE Lawrence, *The Mint* (Garden City: Doubleday) 1957: 29.

¹⁶ Celine: 121.

¹⁷ Alfred M. Hale, *Memoirs*, cited in Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford University Press: New York) 1975: 312.

¹⁸ Richard Holmes, *Acts of War* (New York: Macmillan) 1985: 31, citing Stephen Crane.

¹⁹ Richard Holmes: 50, citing Erich Fromm

²⁰ Robert Graves, *Goodbye to All That* (London: Penguin) 1957: 213.

²¹ Paul Fussell, *The Boy Scout Handbook* (New York: Oxford University Press) 1982: 254.

²² Vigny: 31.

²³ Richard Gabriel, *To Serve with Honor* (New York: Praeger) 1987: 39

²⁴ John Dos Passos, *Nineteen Nineteen* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin) 1946: 28.