

Discipline and Morale: The British Non-Commissioned
Officer on the Western Front 1914-1918

M. Phil. Thesis

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is, in part, to examine the vital part played by the British NCO in the maintenance of discipline on the Western Front in World War One. But its chief aim is to shed light on the largely neglected, but equally vital, contribution made by the British NCO to the upkeep of morale; not just the morale of the private soldier, but also that of the officer. In recognising that the British NCO had a more complex role to perform than has been hitherto acknowledged, it is hoped that this will in some small way serve to challenge the stereotype of the NCO which has endured for so long.

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Introduction

Historically, no rank of the British army has attracted quite as much public opprobrium as that of the non-commissioned officer. Their perceived strategic bungling and callous disregard for human life may have earned the generals of the First World War a pre-eminence in the nation's collective contempt. In the years before the Great War, however, it was the NCO and in particular the sergeant, who was seen as emblematic of the army's worst vices. Between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries the British army's recruiting sergeants were a scourge of the nation's dispossessed. The methods used by the recruiting sergeant to net his prey may have been more subtle than those of his naval counterpart - the offer of free ale, the pledge of the King's shilling, tales of regimental glory in exotic places and the chance to escape the drudgery of urban life - but to the working-class family striving for respectability and fearful that their son be 'gone for a soldier', the recruiting sergeant was a press-ganger by any other name.

In the century since the First World War the popular perception of the NCO has essentially changed very little. As the threat of war has receded and the army's prominence in society declined, so the spectre of the recruiting sergeant has slipped back into the shadows. But if the NCO has long since lost the capacity to engender dread, he nevertheless remains a negative figure in the public imagination. To this day the rank of NCO is still a byword for bullying and scheming. In reality he may have disappeared from public view, but popular fiction has ensured that the hoary old image of the NCO stays fresh in our collective consciousness. In print and on screen, the stereotype has persisted. To modern eyes he is at worst a brutal martinet, embodied in the psychotic marine drill-sergeant of *Full Metal Jacket*, haranguing and physically brutalising his soldiers for battle; or his alter ego, the gnarled, baleful Bigwig of Richard Adams's *Watership Down*. At best he is a parody, a composite of Windsor Davies's blustering buffoon of *It Ain't Half Hot Mum* fame and Phil Silvers' motor-pool schemer, *Sergeant Bilko*.

Demonised and lampooned in popular culture, the British NCO has been largely ignored by academics. Certainly, no serious study of the British NCO in the First World War has yet been attempted; military historians of the Great War have instead tended to focus their attentions on either the British officer or the private soldier. A possible reason for this may be that scholars have to an extent shared in the public's prejudice. The NCO has proved a relatively unfashionable figure, at once lacking the tragic glamour of the idealistic young officer leading from the front and, as a figure of authority, distanced from the ranks of honest, victimised Tommies. The title of the rank, too, is a clumsy, elusive one; its negative prefix suggesting what isn't rather than is. Nor has the army's tradition of bracketing the NCO and private soldier together under the catch-all of 'other ranks' particularly helped. On the few occasions that the NCO has attracted the attention of scholars, it has been his role as the army's chief disciplinarian that has come under most scrutiny.¹ The purpose of this study is, in part, to examine the vital part played by the British NCO in the maintenance of discipline on the Western Front in World War One. But its chief aim is to shed light on the largely neglected, but equally vital, contribution made by the British NCO to the upkeep of morale; not just the morale of the private soldier, but also that of the officer. In recognising that the British NCO had a more complex role to perform than has been hitherto acknowledged, it is hoped that this will in some small way serve to challenge the stereotype of the NCO which has endured for so long.

In seeking to explore the role and performance of the NCO, I have drawn heavily on the diaries, letters and memoirs of those men who made up the ranks of the British army. Together these testimonies provide an invaluable insight into life in the British Army on the Western Front. They must, of course, be treated with a degree of caution. Of the three types of testimony, it is the personal memoir, that 'remarkably slippery medium for preserving facts,'

¹ R. Alford, *On The Word Of Command: A Pictorial History Of The Regimental Sgt. Major*, Tunbridge Wells, 1990; Lt. F. J. Davies, *The Sergeant Major: The Origin And History Of His Rank*, London, 1886; J. Leasor, *The Sergeant Major*, London, 1955.

of which the historian need most beware.¹ Memoirs may be distorted by time, particularly when reconstructing mundane or fleeting events and some will inevitably have been burnished or sentimentalised.² Later narratives, too, will necessarily have informed the reconstruction of past events in the minds - and pens - of survivors. Shell-shock, for instance, was not formally recognised as a medical condition until some time after the war and of the few contemporary testimonies which do attempt to articulate the condition, references are vague; only later, with its formal recognition and public discussion could veterans now possess 'a language in which to locate their own reactions'.³

Despite their greater proximity to events, diaries and letters are equally problematic. The former may have proved a more reliable record of the ephemeral than the memoir, but few diaries are likely to be entirely free of bravado; of what was intended rather than said, of wished for rather than done.⁴ Letters between front and rear must also be approached with caution. Some men may have ignored or negotiated it, but the threat of censorship undoubtedly diluted much of the soldier's correspondence home. As, no doubt, did self-censorship. Contemporary literary convention certainly influenced the content of letters as did soldiers' reluctance to cause undue distress to those back home. In a letter home, Julian Bickersteth, an officer with a battalion of the Leeds Pals, wrote: 'There is so much I should like to tell you which would never be passed by the censor and it would not be right for me to write.'⁵ As one scholar has suggested, 'the balance between self-censorship and self-expression, reality and delicacy is unknowable'.⁶

¹ E. J. Hobsbawm, 'History From Below-Some Reflections', in F. Krantz (ed.), *History From Below*, Oxford, 1988, p. 18.

² A. J. P. Taylor's condemnation of 'old men drooling about their youth' did not, however, sit easy with at least one veteran of the war. With the passage of time Wyn Griffith confessed to experiencing not a misty-eyed nostalgia for the war, but a 'dehydration of sentiment'. Quoted in B. Harrison, 'Oral History and Recent Political History', *Oral History*, 1,3, 1972, p. 46; L. Wyn Griffith, 'The Pattern of One Man's Remembering', in G. A. Panichas (ed.), *Promise of Greatness*, London, 1968, p. 291.

³ M. Roper, 'Re-remembering the Soldier Hero: the Psychic and Social Construction of Memory in Personal Narratives of the Great War', *History Workshop Journal*, 50, Autumn 2000, p. 197.

⁴ One officer given the task of censoring his men's letters recalled at least one private soldier exaggerating his heroism. C. Davison (ed.) *The Burgoyne Diaries*, London, 1985, p. 40.

⁵ Quoted in L. Milner, *Leeds Pals: A History of the 15th (Service) Battalion (1st Leeds) The Prince of Wales's Own (West Yorkshire Regiment) 1914-1918*, 1998, p. 133.

⁶ D. Englander, 'Soldiering and Identity: Reflections on the Great War', *War in History*, 1, 3, 1994, p. 308.

The existence, moreover, of such a rich diversity of personal narratives underlines the fact that in the strictest sense men shared no commonality of experience. Just as their motivations for enlisting varied, so too did men's responses to the war. The testimonies of those who fought show no unanimity of response to battle. Some men, simply by virtue of their character and personality, saw little to shock them, whilst others went through hell. Intelligence and temperament might lead to a totally different response to the same event. As Peter Liddle has recognised: 'Hundreds of thousands of troops may have been wearing khaki uniforms and steel helmets of identical design but within those military trappings were individuals shaped by genetic and environmental influence.'¹ The truth is that we are dealing with a huge number of men in a variety of situations. The outlooks of the regular soldier and the Territorial undoubtedly differed, as did those of the volunteer and the conscript. Different sectors influenced the way that men saw the war, as did their duties and responsibilities. Clearly, such differences serve to caution against generalisation. Nevertheless, experiences which were deeply personal could reflect that which was universal and, besides, although every soldier responded in his own way to the experience of war, the fact remains that men ultimately faced the same hardships and dangers.

¹ P. Liddle, 'The British Soldier on the Somme in 1916', *The Poppy and the Owl*, 21, April 1997, p. 7.

Chapter 1: The pre-war NCO

1.1 The NCO and discipline

On the eve of the First World War, virtually all army regiments had two regular battalions, one stationed at home and the other serving abroad. Infantry battalions and cavalry regiments were organised broadly along the same lines: all were divided into four companies (an eight company system was replaced in late 1913) or squadrons to the cavalryman, each under the command of a major or captain; companies were further divided into half-companies under the control of a second lieutenant. The non-commissioned ranks were headed by two warrant officers (sergeant major and bandmaster) whose responsibility was to the battalion as a whole rather than to any individual company. Each company - at full strength some 250 men - had a colour sergeant (renamed company sergeant upon the outbreak of war) at its head. Next in precedence were the platoon sergeants and section corporals, of which each company had 4 and 5 respectively. The platoon sergeant was responsible for some 60 men, roughly a quarter of a company, while section corporals had up to fifteen men in their charge. At the bottom of the non-commissioned food chain sat the lance corporal, each company usually possessing three or four. The classification of the non-commissioned ranks into the three broad branches of warrant officer, sergeant and corporal concealed in turn a myriad offshoots of specialist ranks and appointments. The headquarters staff of a battalion of infantry included, for instance, NCO schoolmasters, NCO instructors of gym and musketry, sergeant tailors and cooks and corporals trained in signalling and shoemaking; to which in a cavalry battalion would be added NCO farriers and saddlers.¹

Specialist and technical non-commissioned grades aside, the chief function of the pre-war peacetime NCO was the maintenance of discipline. The NCO was responsible both for the discipline of the private soldiers of his unit (in the case of senior NCOs, to this was added the discipline of subordinate NCOs) and the domestic affairs, or 'interior economy', of the unit; the latter was in turn dependent to a large degree upon the disciplined efficiency of each

¹ Major E. Kirkpatrick, *The Training Of An Infantry Company*, Aidershot, 1913, p. x; HMSO, *Field Service Manual*, London, 1913, pp. 8-9.

individual soldier. Apart from the issuing of punishment, which remained the prerogative of the officer, the peacetime NCO was in fact granted a near monopoly over the instruction and supervision of the private soldier and the day to day running of his unit. Company commanders of course were responsible for the issuing of daily routine orders but, once fed down the chain of command, the implementation of those orders was left largely to the NCO.

The NCO had the task of converting new recruits from civilians into soldiers and ensuring they remained that way. Basic training, intended to transform the volunteer from an unfit, ill-disciplined individual into a robust, obedient and selfless soldier, was almost wholly the preserve of the NCO. The army employed both macro and micro devices to bring about the change. Parade-ground drill and route marching, both under the instruction of NCOs, were the most visible devices for turning civilian into soldier. Their effects were twofold. Both served the obvious physical purpose of toughening up the scrawny fledgling soldier. Recruits who had at first been weak, undernourished and prone to fatigue, when exposed to fresh air, physical training and plentiful quantities of food, soon put on weight and height and discovered a new self-respect. Of his time in the army, Robert Blatchford, who for many years was editor of the socialist weekly magazine *Clarion* and whose enthusiasm for the army contributed to his eventual split with the socialist movement, remembered:

‘There was one little frail fellow, who certainly was not fifteen years of age, and was too weak to pull himself up on the horizontal bar, and in a dozen weeks or so he was a tall, smart, young man, who could throw his rifle about like a walking stick. I met this youngster three years later, and he was a big drummer in a line regiment, stood six feet two inches in his stockings, and weighed nearly fifteen stone.’¹

Drill and marching paid off physically and brought about a mental transformation, stripping the new intake of all civilian pretensions and welding together disparate individuals into a uniform whole, one that moved and thought according to a single rhythm.

Pre-war discipline entailed much more than parades and square-bashing, however. Defined tortuously but accurately by one contemporary observer as ‘a constant condition of

¹ R. Blatchford, *My Life in the Army*, London, 1910, p. 136.

order in a military body maintained by the observance of established rules and by acts indicating respect for constituted authority', discipline was something running through the very grain of army life.¹ From the minute he took the King's Shilling to the day the army relinquished its hold of him, every aspect of the private soldier's working life was subject to strict control. Great store was placed on camp and individual smartness. A host of regulations and daily inspections, the majority of which were carried out not by officers but by senior NCOs, governed the soldier's time and movement. Men observed strict punctuality and paid close attention to their belongings and appearance, maintaining spotless barracks, polishing brasses and pipe-claying belts and shaving daily. Instructions from NCOs had to be heeded while respect for officers was displayed by saluting at all times and addressing them as sir. Smartness had to be observed twenty-four hours a day, on duty or off. Even when walking out, the private soldier was issued with a cane to dissuade him from placing his hands in his pockets. Day after day, week after week, month after month, men were taught not to question or ponder but to obey.² Ingrained obedience readied recruits for war since, so it was believed, troops who could respond with speed and smartness to any command could face any crisis in battle. If strict discipline succeeded in burying the natural urge to flee, bullying, threats and punishments were also an effective means of keeping men aware of the military hierarchy and their meagre place in it.

The sergeant major was the army's chief executive of discipline. He worked in tandem with the adjutant (in effect, the army's personnel-officer) and the provost-sergeants (battalion police) in overseeing general battalion discipline. The bulk of the sergeant major's time, however, was divided between the supervision and control of the battalion's NCOs - monitoring their deportment and effectiveness in the maintenance of discipline - and in briefing his commanding officer on the state of battalion discipline, furnishing him with the

¹ J. Gollyer, "The Discipline of the Citizen Soldier", *Army Review*, Vol. 5, October 1913, p. 331.

² Discipline may be said to have been enforced 364 days of the year, Christmas day being the exception, when even the most draconian NCO turned a blind eye to minor indiscretions. This was a period for the sanctioned letting off of steam and the partial settling of old scores. Frank Richards remembered it as a time 'when the beer took effect, scrapping started and unpopular NCOs made themselves scarce for the remainder of the day'. F. Richards, *Old Soldier Sahib*, London, 1936, p. 42.

particulars of any charges to be heard and ensuring the necessary conduct sheets were at hand.¹ In the course of his everyday duties, except for an hour or two of parade-ground drill (he was expected to be present at reveille and tattoo only twice a week) or when accompanying an offender brought before the CO, the sergeant major had relatively little direct contact with the private soldier.²

Instead, it was left largely to the sergeants and corporals to monitor the discipline of the private soldier and co-ordinate the daily routine of barrack life. The rank of sergeant represented the main arterial link between officer and man. As such, the sergeant shouldered a double burden of responsibility, accountable as he was for his men and to his officers. 'He must know his own work,' wrote Blatchford, 'and the private's work, and the officer's work.'³ The colour sergeant's disciplinary duties book-ended the working day: ensuring his men were out of bed and in bed on time. In between, he called the company roll and detailed his men their duties; inspected his company and marched it on parade - morning and afternoon; supervised the guard and supplied it with ammunition and drew up the list of offenders to be paraded before the sergeant major. Before lights out and the attendant inspection, the sergeant had to find time to map out a detail of duty for the following day and report to his company officer, furnishing him with a brief day's end summary of the state of company discipline and efficiency.⁴

Like the private, the NCO was himself subject to strict discipline. As his unit's standard bearer, he had to be a model of disciplined excellence, setting a personal example of smartness for his men to follow. The embodiment of efficiency and punctuality, he had also to display impeccable temperance, guarding against foul language and insobriety; off-duty as well as on. 'A sergeant,' remembered Blatchford of his time as aNCO, 'is on duty night or

¹ Cpt. R. Martin, *The Non-Commissioned Officer's Pocket Book*, London, 1907, p. 9.

² Gale and Polden, *Notes for Commanding Officers*, Aidershot, 1917, p. 317.

³ Blatchford, *My Life in the Army*, p. 187.

⁴ Ibid, p. 186; P. C. R. Legh, *A Simple Guide to Interior Economy*, London, 1918, p. 8; *Standing Orders of the 2nd Battalion The King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry*, Aidershot, 1906, p. 63. Heavy though the sergeant's routine workload was, it was as nought compared to the one week in four when he served his turn as orderly sergeant. This was a time when, technically, the sergeant was on twenty-four hour call; when his presence might be demanded in the middle of the night by his sergeant major to carry out a spot-check to see if any man had sneaked out of camp. H. D. Acland-Troyte, *Through the Ranks to a Commission*, London, 1881, p. 141.

day, asleep or awake; every day; always.’¹ A system of mutual surveillance operated, in which the behaviour of each grade of NCO fell under the watchful eye of an immediate superior. Thus the corporal was monitored by the sergeant, the sergeant by the sergeant major and the sergeant major by the adjutant. An NCO who failed, therefore, to note and correct a disciplinary infraction committed by a subordinate was himself liable to be disciplined.²

Responding to a disciplinary offence was not, however, the same as reporting it. The army, though it demanded vigilance from the NCO, nevertheless required him to display a degree of tact in his execution and supervision of discipline. The NCO was expected to be judicious in his application of army regulations, avoiding the temptation to apply the letter of the law to every infringement; instead, evaluating each incident on its merits. Acts of blatant indiscipline had of course to be dealt with in a peremptory manner, but for a NCO to have relayed to his commanding officer details of every minor infraction committed by a subordinate would have saddled the authorities with an enormous bureaucratic burden. ‘There passes under his observation,’ observed one NCO, ‘much which never does nor is expected to fall under the eyes of his officer.’³ Another went as far as to suggest that, in matters of discipline the NCO was effectively ‘the complete master and final referee on all matters’.⁴

Certainly, much was left to the discretion of the NCO, and for good reason. Working as he did in such close proximity to his men enabled the NCO to acquire a thorough knowledge of their characters. The NCO was well placed to distinguish an act of exuberance from one of malice; to recognise the less than prompt response to an order as an act not of wilful defiance but the gesture of a man with a genuine grievance. The most effective NCOs were those who avoided confrontation, identified a problem early and checked its escalation, sought to pacify rather than punish. The newly promoted man was advised to remember that ‘it is not the best non-commissioned officer who brings up the most men for punishment, but

¹ Blatchford, *My Life in the Army*, p. 186.

² HMSO, *Manual of Military Law*, 1899, pp. 19-30.

³ “By One of Them”, ‘Our non-commissioned officers’, *United Services Magazine*, Vol. III, 1880, p. 103.

⁴ Acland-Troyte, *Through the Ranks*, p. 125.

he who, whilst doing his duty strictly, endeavours at the same time to prevent crime'.¹ The NCO executed orders and oversaw discipline but he had no authority to punish. Once he had charged, arrested and confined a man, the NCO's role in the disciplinary process was over and the issuing of punishment was left to an officer (the corporal's minimal authority even prevented him from confining a man unless he had at least four years of service).² The NCO was expected to deputise the private soldier in breaking up a fight or restraining a drunkard. This was as much for the protection of the offender as the NCO, since the miscreant whose temper led him to manhandle a senior NCO was likely to face a much more serious charge than the original crime for which he was arrested.³ The authority of the NCO had to be seen to be upheld and the army came down hard on the private soldier who violated an immediate superior. Blatchford recalled a man receiving two years imprisonment with hard labour for merely attempting to hit a NCO.⁴

The army adopted an equivocal stance to the punishment of the NCO, at once more lenient and more severe than its treatment of the ranker. For relatively minor offences the NCO, like the private, could be admonished or, more seriously, reprimanded. Unlike the private, however, the NCO could not be subjected to summary or minor punishment such as extra fatigues or additional guard duty since to do so would have compromised his standing in the eyes of his men.⁵ Local commanders were prevented from summarily reducing a NCO, whilst a NCO above the rank of corporal could not be tried by a court inferior to that of a Divisional Court-Martial. The downside was that, if charged with an offence, unlike the private he could not claim a trial by court martial to vindicate his conduct, which effectively left him to the tender mercies of his accusers.⁶

¹ *Standing Orders of the 2nd Battalion The King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry*, p. 48.

² *The Queen's Regulations and Orders for the Army*, 1881.

³ Acland-Troyte, *Through the Ranks*, p. 156.

⁴ Blatchford, *My Life in the Army*, pp. 44,45, 261.

⁵ W. Gordon, *The Sergeant's Pocket Book*, Aidershot, 1900, p. 124; HMSO, *Field Service Pocket Book*, 1914, Bedfordshire] C[ounty] R[ecords] O[ffice], p. 216.

⁶ "Ex-Non-Com", 'The Case For A Democratic Army', *United Services Magazine*, Vol. XLII, 1911, p. 262.

Still, it was not in the interests of the army to demote an NCO on a whim. A man of experience and expertise whose abilities had been nurtured over many years was a valuable asset not easily replaced and the decision to reduce a seasoned NCO was not taken lightly. Nevertheless, the NCO was there to set an example to his men. A senior NCO had more influence over the lives of his men, for good or ill, than any other man in the regiment and the authorities recognised the disease a rotten apple might spread. Consequently, whilst a minor offence might be met with leniency, an NCO brought up on a more serious charge would be made an example of, sometimes in the most ignominious fashion - more than one memoir bears witness to the public humiliation of a disgraced senior NCO, his buttons ceremonially torn from his tunic on the barrack-square in full view of his battalion.¹ Swift though they were to punish serious offences, the authorities were prepared to forgive and a reduction in rank did not necessarily bar a man from advancing once more up the non-commissioned promotion ladder. A lance corporal who had lost his stripe through an act of misconduct ordinarily had to wait six months before being eligible for re-appointment; a lance sergeant twice as long.² J. H. Shakespeare, who enlisted with the East Lancashire Regiment as an 18 year-old in 1889, was given a second chance to prove himself. Shakespeare took four years to acquire the rank of full corporal but was reduced shortly after gaining his second stripe for a second disciplinary offence. Eighteen months on, however, he was again appointed lance corporal and made a full sergeant three years later.³

The army's chief custodian of discipline, the NCO was also given a prominent role to play in the maintenance of the welfare of the private soldier. The British army's long observed tradition of paternalism required officers to display a high level of care for their men.⁴ Yet it was largely paternalism by proxy. The officer was granted strategic responsibility

¹ The wartime memoir of P. G. Heath records the 'very ugly sight' of a sergeant publicly reduced to the ranks following the theft of a fellow NCO's watch. P. G. Heath, memoir, DS/MISC/60, IWM, p. 11; see also C. Callender, memoir, 73/186/1, IWM, p. 1.

² *Standing Orders of the Second Battalion The Welch Regiment* London, 1909, p. 16.

³ It seems, however, that Shakespeare was not cut out for the job. He ended his army career some eight years later once more a lowly lance jack, having again been reduced to the ranks. J. H. Shakespeare, service papers, WO 97/5871, PRO.

⁴ D. Roberts, *Paternalism in Early Victorian England*, London, 1979, p. 6.

for the private soldier's well-being, but the day-to-day delivery of welfare, like discipline, was left almost wholly in the hands of the NCO. It was the sergeants and corporals who were held principally responsible for ranker welfare. Between them they oversaw the smooth and efficient running of the 'interior economy' of their units. They saw to it that their men were adequately fed and clothed: attended to their company's rations, ensuring that food was hot, of acceptable quality and evenly distributed and paid regular attention to each man's kit, noting deficiencies and items to be repaired or replaced. The health of the individual soldier was in turn bound up with his environment and NCOs were held responsible for ensuring that barracks were well ventilated and latrines regularly emptied and cleaned. The army paid little explicit heed to the emotional welfare of the private soldier which was viewed largely as a by-product of sound discipline and good housekeeping. In the eyes of the authorities, the soldier who was well-drilled, clean, orderly and materially well-provided for was, by definition, a physically fit and therefore emotionally secure individual.¹

1.2 The impact of discipline on NCO - ranker relations

To the man who had signed up to the colours in the middle of Victoria's reign, the British Army of 1914 would have appeared, superficially at least, much more humane. The worst excesses of military discipline had been abolished or moderated: flogging had long since ceased to be practised whilst hanging, though it remained the ultimate sanction, was increasingly rare. As well as dismantling some of the more destructive features of its military code, the army had seen fit to introduce a number of welfare initiatives in the shape of sports pitches, regimental libraries and savings banks. Soldiers' homes also offered education and diversion from the wet canteen and public house, as did writing and coffee rooms. The quality and quantity of food, too, had witnessed some improvement, as had the hygiene of barracks, and there was now a greater liberality in the granting of leave.²

¹ Legh, *Simple Guide to Interior Economy*, pp. 19-21.

² A. B. McHardy, 'The soldiers barrack room', *The Nineteenth Century*, Vol. XXVIII, 1890, p. 261.

A degree of change had been inevitable. The Victorian era had witnessed the passing of legislation designed to ameliorate some of the worst conditions endured by the working classes and, while the army was an institution that in many respects sat conveniently outside of society, it was not impervious to the changing climate of benevolence or the pressure of public opinion. Yet the improvement in conditions owed less to conscience than pragmatism. The army's predilection for corporal punishment throughout the first half of the nineteenth century had failed to show a significant reduction in military crime and, indeed, in some categories of offence crime had actually risen. Dissatisfaction within the army with the results of corporal punishment coupled with a recognition that progressive changes in civilian courts had not resulted in high crime rates, prompted some to question whether the authorities were not using a hammer to smash an egg. Might not efficiency, it was argued, be fostered best by a more sympathetic approach to discipline, by tact and mutual respect rather than by bullying and the threat of physical violence.¹

On paper at least, the military authorities appeared prepared to concede some ground to an approach to discipline based on enlightened prevention rather than rough cure. Enshrined in *Queen's Regulations* were strict guidelines for the fair treatment of the private soldier. NCOs were encouraged to be cautious in their application of discipline. The use of intemperate language was strongly discouraged and NCOs were strictly forbidden from laying hands on their men.² The NCO was, moreover, expected to 'study the temper' of each of the men under his command, making allowance for their different capacities and 'always bearing in mind that careful individual instruction is the best means of developing ... intelligence, and is therefore, the foundation of military efficiency'.³ In principal, therefore, the army recognised the utilitarian value of compassionate treatment. In reality, however, it was confronted with a dilemma.

¹ "A Troop Sergeant-Major of Dragoons", 'Our Non-Commissioned Officers', *United Services Magazine*, Vol. IV, 1891-2, pp. 361-2; A. R. Skelley, *The Victorian Army at Home*, London, 1977, pp. 142-3.

² *Queen's Regulations*, p. 86.

³ Gale and Polden, *The NCO's Guide to Promotion in the Infantry*, London, 1906, p. 35; "Anon", 'The Present Lack of Good Non Coms', *United Services Magazine*, Vol. II, 1878, p. 482.

Despite the army's best efforts to alter the public's perception of military life, the nineteenth century had witnessed a steady decline in army recruitment; a decline not halted in the decade after the death of Queen Victoria. In the years after the Boer War the military authorities embarked on a series of public relations exercises designed to raise both the number and quality of recruits. In 1903, the army made it compulsory for recruits to possess a civilian character reference. This signalled an apparent commitment on the part of the military authorities to raising standards. Further attempts to improve the army's public image followed, including a press campaign aimed at 'educating the public as to the true facts of Army life' which saw adverts placed in the press, pamphlets in cinemas and even an army information bureau set up at the Earls Court Exhibition of 1913.'

In truth, however, no amount of propaganda could disguise the fact that there remained scant material inducement to enlistment. The pay of a private on the eve of the First World War remained lower than that of a farm labourer and there were few provisions made for after his discharge.² Food and shelter were of course guaranteed and the new recruit had clothes put on his back, but the cost of replaced garments came from the soldier's own pocket.³ Ironically, the advances made in improving the social and economic conditions of the working class - reforms that had, in part, prompted army reform - diminished further the army's appeal (the National Insurance Act of 1911 made payment for the temporarily out of work more than that of a soldier's pay).⁴ Materially unattractive, enlistment also meant the sacrifice of personal liberty and, ultimately, carried with it the threat of death. Consequently, life in the lower ranks of the army continued to appeal as it had always done to few but the desperate, and the army's intake remained poor, both in quantity and quality.⁵ The continued

¹ Minutes of Proceedings for Army Council, 1915, WO 163/20, PRO.

² At the turn of the century only the Irish farm labourer was financially worse off than an infantry private. By 1913, however, even the poorest paid agricultural labourer in Caithness - itself the region with the lowest wage rates in mainland Britain - remained 2s better off than the private soldier. Skelley, *Victorian Army*, pp. 192-3; E. M. Spiers, 'The regular army in 1914', in I. F. W. Beckett and K. Simpson (eds.), *A Nation in Arms: a Social Study of the British Army in the First World War*, London, 1990, p. 46.

³ "Ex-Non-Com", 'The Recruiting Crisis', *United Services Magazine*, Vol. XLVIII, 1913-14, p. 383.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *The Report of the Health of the Army for the year 1909* estimated that over 90% of the intake for that year was unemployed. Cd. 5477, 1911, XLVII, p. 2.

poor calibre of recruit in turn dictated the army's treatment of him. Despite aspirations to a more enlightened approach to discipline, the army was presented with men whose conversion from urban slum dweller to efficient soldier could, in its estimation, be achieved only through strict discipline.

The new recruit's initial period of basic training was particularly harsh. Recruits typically spent the first six weeks of their army career at the base depot of their new regiment. There the superficial conversion from civilian to soldier was performed. The new recruit was issued with a uniform, had his hair shorn, was put through his paces on the drill square and settled into a strict routine. At first glance this was not an excessively harsh introduction to army life, especially for men used to the hardship of pit and factory. But regimental depots were places of some notoriety. There was a tradition in the pre-war army for the oldest and least competent NCOs to gravitate - or be *Stellenbosched* - to the base depot, where their age or incompetence mattered less.¹ These were the worst of the old soldier types, men whose skulls had failed to be permeated by the army's more enlightened directives and who had little inclination or incentive to be anything more than perfunctory in their dealings with troops with whom they had no ties and who in a matter of a few weeks would be out of their hands. As late as 1907, corporal punishment was still freely and gratuitously administered at depots. J. W. Riddell, who enlisted with the Rifle Brigade, recalled being kicked behind the thighs and jabbed savagely in the ribs during inspection, while R. G. Garrod, who enlisted in a cavalry regiment, remembered a senior NCO who had a habit of 'thrashing you around the thighs and legs with the flat of his sword if you made a mistake'.²

His period of basic training over, the new recruit could look forward to a less brutal existence with his battalion, in the company of NCOs and officers with whom he would spend his career. But if the move to a permanent home heralded an end to overt acts of physical brutality, the general tone of discipline remained strict. Recruits nevertheless anticipated strict

¹ 'Ex-Non-Com', 'The Genesis of Grouching', *United Services Magazine*, Vol. XLVI, 1912-13 p. 204; Major A. W. A. Pollock, 'Training Recruits at Regimental Depots', *Journal of the Royal United Services Institution*, Vol. XLVI, 1902, p. 676.

² J. W. Riddell, memoir, 77/73/1, IWM, p. 4; R. G. Garrod, memoir, 79/44/1, IWM, p. 11.

discipline and indeed quickly accepted it. Troops would grouse and moan but provided discipline was administered evenly and fairly they had no real complaint. Discipline only became a negative force when it was administered unjustly. What did arouse the private soldier's wrath was the feeling that he was victim of an injustice. Deep resentment might be caused over a trumped up charge or a kneejerk response by an NCO to a minor infringement - a justifiable response since even the most minor infraction remained a permanent blemish on a man's record and might well stay with him into civilian life. Just as sure to sour relations was the belief, imagined or otherwise, that the NCO was exploiting his position at the ranker's expense. The private soldier recognised and accepted that the NCO was entitled to certain extra privileges of rank. But those privileges were all too often perceived to be augmented at a cost to the private soldier. A particular bone of contention centred on deductions. Men's accounts were settled via the colour sergeant on the last day of each month and invariably proved controversial. Deductions, listed under the uncertain heading of 'barrack-room damages', demanded recompense of anything from the loss or breakage of cutlery to the use of consumables such as soap and floor-cloths. Frank Richards, who struggled to recall a single occasion in his long army career when his pay suffered no such stoppages, doubted the veracity of some NCOs who he was convinced were swindling the men.¹

The army, well aware of the corrosive impact an unscrupulous or savage individual could have on morale, made available channels of appeal for the ranker. It was hoped that officers would act as a check on the authority of NCOs by being at once astute enough to see through spurious charges brought by NCOs and also give fair hearing to ranker complaints.² In the interests of order, however, officers had to trust their NCOs implicitly and it was inevitable that officers should invariably accept the word of the NCO over that of the private soldier. Few grievances, moreover, ever reached the attention of the officer. For a private soldier to launch an appeal was in effect to launch a counter charge against an NCO; an

¹ Richards, *Old Soldier Sahib*, p. 32.

² W. Gore-Brown, 'Life in a Cavalry Regiment', *The Nineteenth Century*, Vol. XXVIII, 1890, pp. 847-8.

extremely intimidating course on which to embark. ‘To see the commanding officer,’ wrote one veteran, ‘a man has to run the gauntlet of four or five superiors; and then at the end probably find the adjutant, the sergeant-major, and one or two officers embarrassing by their presence his petition.’¹ For those brave enough to bring a complaint against an NCO, the writing of a wrong might be poor compensation for the likely pay back. R. G. Garrod’s corporal put him on some fabricated charge for refusing to lend him his kit cleaner. The colonel recognised the charge for what it was and dismissed it, issuing the NCO a ticking off into the bargain. Garrod, however, was doubly victimised thereafter and given worse fatigues.²

As the army’s chief custodian of discipline and therefore its most visible symbol of authority, it should come as no surprise that it was the NCO who proved the principal target of ranker derision and hostility. J. W. Riddell claimed that ‘all NCOs were detested by the men, some more than others’.³ Certainly, there were individual NCOs who chose to make the life of the new recruit a misery and who with justification were held in contempt. More often than not, however, it tended to be the non-commissioned rank itself that was viewed with hostility rather than any particular individual. Feelings of resentment at unpalatable orders or contempt for the military system were directed at local figures of authority, the most immediate for the private soldier being the NCO.

Nevertheless, though loss of face doubtless prevented more than but a few from ever openly admitting to it, it is clear that most troops were capable of seeing beyond the NCO’s rank and distinguishing between the man delivering unpalatable orders and the source of their origin. The private soldier would grumble at the apparent absurdity of rules and bemoan the blasting he received on parade from a drill sergeant, but over time he took satisfaction in his own discipline and smartness. Men began to appreciate the benefits of discipline and in turn recognise the connection between their own disciplined smartness and the efforts of their NCO instructors. F. M. Packham initially viewed his drill sergeants as bullies but later began

¹ ‘Ex-Non-Com’, ‘Genesis of Grouching’, pp. 203, 209, 210.

² Garrod, memoir, p. 14.

³ Riddell, memoir, p. 12.

to recognise that they had a job to do.¹ Horace Wyndham's sergeant major was feared by his men, but at the same time they remained proud of him. In their eyes, 'he could handle a squad or a battalion as nobody else could handle one'.² Wyndham's observation is instructive.

Wyndham's NCO might have been bullying in his manner and his eye for detail at times fanatical, but the men under his command recognised his contribution to the battalion. He both shaped and reflected their smartness.

It was in the NCO's best interests to foster cordial relations with his men, since troops who were happy in their work were likely to be more efficient and manageable. But successfully balancing discipline with consideration was not straightforward. The NCO was confronted with a dilemma. Though he had the same poor quality recruits to discipline and turn into efficient soldiers, the NCO on the eve of the First World War could no longer rely on the big stick method of discipline to bring about the conversion; the NCO literally had less clout than his Victorian predecessor. 'It must be admitted that the difficulty of commanding is greater,' observed one NCO. But the same NCO conceded that 'with the greater need for tact and judgement in the application of power a finer discrimination and a greater sympathy have sprung up'.³ Most battalions still possessed their fair share of 'old soldier' types, but anecdotal evidence suggests that by the turn of the century a better type of man was making inroads into the non-commissioned ranks; in the words of one contemporary, a 'younger, up-to-date, educated man, whose enforcement of discipline was tempered by sarcasm and cleverness'.⁴ The most successful NCOs had, in truth, never relied purely on their institutional and coercive power. The NCOs who commanded legitimate authority in the eyes of their subordinates did so by virtue of their personal abilities and qualities.⁵

If the army encouraged the NCO to be cordial in his dealings with his men, it nevertheless stopped short of allowing inter-rank friendships to flourish. Cordial relations were encouraged during the working day but NCOs and rankers were strictly forbidden from

¹ F. M. Packham, memoir, P 316, IWM, p. 2.

² H. Wyndham, *Following the Drum*, London, 1914, p. 40.

³ "A Troop Sergeant-Major of Dragoons", 'Our Non-Commissioned Officers', p. 361.

⁴ Hawke, *From Private to Major*, p. 62.

⁵ 'Anon', 'The Present Lack of Good Non-coms', p. 478.

associating off duty. The same logic that operated to uphold the officer's authority served to underpin that of the NCO. In the eyes of the authorities, familiarity bred contempt. The army believed that only by setting NCOs and ranks visibly apart could the NCO's authority be upheld and discipline enforced. A contemporary manual spelt out the dangers for NCOs of getting too close to their men: 'The practice hampers non-commissioned officers in the execution of their duty, and frequently leads to acts of insubordination on the part of the men.'¹ It was the newly promoted NCO's former association with the ranks that created most problems. Lance corporals sometimes struggled to sever their ties to the ranks. 'The non-commissioned officers enlisting from the same town stick to one another and wink at crime,' observed one contemporary. 'The only crimes of late years brought to notice are absence without leave and drunkenness returning to barracks. These crimes can't be screened.'²

The penalties for a NCO discovered fraternising with a private soldier were severe, typically the loss of a stripe for a sergeant and a reduction to the ranks for a corporal.³ Few NCOs, therefore, were willing to jeopardise their hard won promotion by continuing their former associations. Invariably, however, it was less the threat of demotion than the new NCO's increased wage and new acquaintances that severed his umbilicus to the ranks.⁴ The private soldier, too, was most comfortable when furthest removed from authority, and the stripes of the freshly promoted NCO marked him out as an interloper in the barracks. "It's like this," remembered Horace Wyndham of the response of his comrades to his promotion to lance-corporal, "we never know when you mightn't want to run us in for something or other!"⁵ But official statistics indicate that the threat of a reduction in rank was insufficient to deter all NCOs from fraternising with rankers. Between the years 1888-1890 some 29 NCOs (of whom eight were sergeants and the rest corporals) were found guilty of

¹ Lt. Col. H. M. Bengough, *Military Catechism for Non-Commissioned Officers and Soldiers*, London, 1880, p. 21.

² J. Byrne, 'Boy-sergeants', *The 19th Century*, Vol. XXVIII, 1890, p. 836.

³ Acland-Troyte, *Through the Ranks*, pp. 135, 161.

⁴ H. Wyndham, *The Queen's Service*, London, 1899, p. 155.

⁵ H. Wyndham, 'Officers and Men', *United Services Magazine*, Vol. XXV, 1902, p. 184.

gambling, the vast majority of who were caught playing cards with rankers.¹ The number of incidences that went undetected or met with a wink from a senior NCO can only be guessed at. Richards insisted that most NCOs turned a blind eye to gambling with the exception of the RSM and colour sergeants who 'had their dignity to keep up'.²

1.3 Officer - other rank relations

Relations between officers and other ranks in the pre-war army reflected, if not magnified, the rigid class structure of Victorian society. The pre-war officer class was, like the social class it was almost to a man drawn from, a closed order virtually cut off by privilege from the ranks beneath it. Both professionally and socially, there existed a huge gulf separating officer and private. It was a gulf which served to confirm officer authority, underlining the distance between officer and man which was thought necessary to ensure discipline. The private soldier knew his officers essentially only as men who inspected or punished him and, even then, officers remained distant and aloof; a word of praise for a smart kit or a well executed display on parade would invariably be conveyed to the private through a NCO, as would the administering of a dressing down or punishment.³ A ranker who wished to speak to an officer on a private matter could do so only when accompanied by a senior NCO. The dissuading presence of a senior NCO warned against over-familiarity by subordinates and generally prohibited any irregular requests that the occasional officer, especially a young and inexperienced one, might be naive enough to grant.⁴

The landscape of barrack life during the Victorian era was in fact comparatively free of officers. Cavalry officers especially were frequently away on leave, in some cases for up to half of the year, and even when present rarely in attendance past midday; social and sporting

¹ *Return of Number of Cases of Non-Commissioned Officers Tried by Court-Martial, and punished for allowing Gambling or Card-playing, 1888-90*, PP. Cd.269, 1892, L.

² Richards, *Old Soldier Sahib*, p. 72.

³ Brig. Gen. R. J. Kentish, *The Maxims of the Late Field Marshall Viscount Wolseley*, London, p. 2; Wyndham, 'Officers and Men', p. 188.

⁴ Richards, *Old Soldier Sahib*, p.156.

pursuits taking precedence over section training.¹ High rates of absenteeism meant that few cavalry officers had more than a cursory knowledge of the men in their units. Officers committing to memory the sheet records of their men on the eve of an inspection by a visiting worthy was not unheard of. One contemporary has left the extraordinary tale of a captain who, following an inspection by a visiting dignitary, was taken to one side by his colour sergeant and informed that he had given the wrong family history of a private soldier. Immediately the officer ordered the private to be brought to him, ‘exactly as he would have ordered a defaulter’ and demanded an explanation from the soldier as to why he had no children!²

The infantry officer, lacking the personal income of his cavalry counterpart, was more likely to spend a greater length of time with his battalion. But even the infantry officer was a relatively remote figure to his men.³ NCOs remained the ranker’s main point of contact with authority. That officers continued to be little more than silent partners in the running of their units is encapsulated neatly in the well-worn order to “Carry on Sergeant Major”.⁴

By the Edwardian era, however, the signs were that the officer’s days of diletantism were over. As part of its commitment to greater professionalism and efficiency after the debacle of the Boer War, the army placed an increasingly greater executive burden on its officers, demanding they spend more time with their battalions, working closely with and acquiring a more thorough knowledge of the men whom they would lead in any future conflict. Officers also saw restrictions placed on their free time, prompting consternation amongst some observers fearful lest the army’s drive to efficiency dissuade potential officer recruits from choosing a military career. One contemporary wrote of the need to return to the days when an officer’s life was ‘as pleasant as it always used to be considered’, when he could slip away when there was ‘nothing particular going on’, instead of now having ‘to stay

¹ W. Robertson, *From Private to Field Marshal*, London, 1921, p. 9.

² “Anon”, *Our Depot Battalion. For Old Soldiers*, London, 1889, pp. 66-7.

³ J. Lucy, *There’s a Devil in the Drum*, London, 1938, p. 95.

⁴ ‘If the captains and subalterns go on leave at the same time,’ wrote one contemporary, ‘the battalion somehow manages to get along without them. But it cannot do this if the sergeant major and colour sergeants are absent.’ Wyndham, *Following the Drum*, p. 69.

in during the drill season'.¹ Ironically, the army's efficiency drive obliged junior officers to receive specialist training in section leadership and technical matters, removing them from their units for much of the time. Training courses rather than a hectic social calendar may have provided the infantry officer of the Edwardian era with a more honourable motive for absenteeism than his Victorian predecessor, but, whatever the reason, the fact still remained that most officers continued to have relatively little contact with their men.²

The NCO, unlike the private soldier, had fairly regular contact with his officer. The smooth running of a battalion demanded that there be a close association between officer and NCO, the former instructing the latter on daily orders to be passed down the chain of command, the latter feeding back to his superior on the state of battalion discipline.³ In the interests of efficiency, professional relations between NCOs and officers were seldom less than cordial. But the same on-off duty rules that applied to the NCO and ranker also dictated officer and NCO relations. Unlike those laid down for NCOs and rankers, there were no formal rules laid down governing relations between officers and NCO. It was tacitly assumed, however, that any contact between the two ranks was expected to begin and end with the start and completion of the working day. Significant events in a battalion's social calendar would occasionally bring officers and senior NCOs together - warrant officers and sergeants who had made a major contribution to the sporting life of the battalion might be invited to dine in the officer's mess, while a reciprocal offer might be made by the sergeant's mess, usually in the shape of a request for an officer as guest speaker or to present an award as the culmination of a 'smoking concert' - while the two ranks might meet on the sports field in a football or cricket match organised by the sergeant's mess. But such affairs tended to be annual events and were the exception rather than the norm.⁴ Moreover, though officers and other ranks might come together on the cricket or football pitch, once the match was over 'no officer

¹ Major D. J. C. Compton, 'The Shortage of Officers in the Army', *Journal of the Royal United Services Institution*, Vol. L, 1906, pp. 788, 794-5; 'Ex-Non-Com', 'The Case for a Democratic Army', *United Services Magazine*, Vol. XLII, 1911, p. 260.

² Duke of Bedford, 'How to Restore Military Efficiency', *The Nineteenth Century*, Vol. LXXIV, 1913, p. 60.

³ Brig. Gen. A. W. Taylor, *How To Organize and Administer A Battalion*, London, 1915, p. 28.

⁴ "Green Tiger". *Journal of the Leicestershire Regiment*, July 1905, p. 8.

would dream of walking up to barracks with one of his cricket playmates of a few minutes before'.¹

1.4 Relations between NCOs

The same logic that underpinned the off-duty relationship between officers and other ranks also served to govern the relationship between the various grades of NCO. In the interests of discipline, senior and junior NCOs were strictly forbidden from associating off-duty, and for good reason: for a sergeant to give an order to a corporal with whom he had been carousing the night before was clearly potentially problematic. In reality, however, the separation of junior and senior NCOs owed less to any formally imposed prohibition by the authorities than the actions and customs of the NCOs themselves.

The aggregate differences of pay and privileges enjoyed by the sergeant erected a barrier between him and the corporal. Chief amongst those privileges was the sergeants' mess. The mess was the centre of the senior NCO's off-duty world and virtually every free moment available to him the sergeant spent there. Any NCO below the rank of lance sergeant was denied access to the sergeants' mess. In barracks it was therefore rare for sergeants and corporals to ever find themselves in each others company outside of work hours. Out of barracks there would of course be opportunities for the two to rub shoulders, but even out of sight of authority it was rare for senior NCOs to be seen mixing with their junior counterparts. Having laboured long and hard to reach the pinnacle of his rank, the sergeant was unlikely to risk his stripes by getting caught fraternising with a subordinate. The two grades of NCO might occasionally team up on the sports field to take on a team of privates or officers, but that was rare.² So too, perhaps because of fears about the threat to the authority of the sergeant, were contests between corporals and sergeants. Instead, inter-rank sporting fixtures were generally confined to contests between NCOs of the same rank, while even special

¹ G. Dallas and D. Gill, *The Unknown Army: Mutinies in the British Army in World War I*, London, 1985, p. 20.

² "The Antelope" *A Quarterly Journal of the Royal Warwickshire Regiment*, April, 1911, p. 96-8.

annual events such as battalion sports days tended to be restricted to competitions between corporals and rankers.¹

That is not to say, of course, that there were no instances of NCOs of different rank developing close friendships.² But by and large each NCO kept to the company of men of the same rank. As a result, there existed no single corporate identity amongst the non-commissioned ranks; any solidarity that was shared was felt by sergeants for sergeants and corporals for corporals. Even then, the subtle distinctions between the ranks of lance and full corporal weighed against any sense of community amongst junior NCOs. Although nominally there was little to separate the two grades, the ranks of corporal and lance corporal were a gulf apart in terms of status. The rank of lance corporal was separated from the ranker by a whisker, his duties and leisure time serving as a constant reminder of his nearness to the ranks. By contrast, the man in possession of a second stripe had placed safe distance between himself and the private soldier. The full corporal had his eyes on the prize of the sergeants' mess and had little personal inclination to mix with those beneath him.

If off-duty distinctions served to militate against the forging of close relations between the various grades of NCOs, so too did the nature of the NCO's duties. The peculiar position occupied by the NCO in the military hierarchy not infrequently proved a source of friction. The NCO was at once accountable for his subordinates and to his superiors. As such, he had to be doubly watchful, always on the look out for an infraction of discipline by a private and forever looking over his shoulder lest his response to a misdemeanour be deemed by a superior to be either too lenient or over zealous. If any private was found guilty of untidiness, idleness or insubordination, then it was the NCO who was held answerable. A neglect of duty by a private reflected badly on the private's immediate superior, the corporal. In turn, an offence committed by a private and missed or dismissed by a corporal might snowball and lead to trouble for the sergeant. Consequently, in the interests of discipline, warrant officers drove their sergeants who in turn drove their corporals, only for the latter to

¹ *Green Tiger*, June 1905, p. 8; *Antelope*, April 1911, p. 78.

² "'The Wasp'. *The Journal of the Bedfordshire Regiment*, 10.7.56, p. 56.

visit similar torment on the private soldier. One veteran NCO recalled: 'If I ever acted kindly towards a man when another NCO would have cast him into the innermost prison, I have been regarded as lenient.. .If I failed to roar and bellow in the bulldog fashion, I was regarded as a meek and effeminate kind of being.' The same author conceded that he had the warmest respect for his fellows, but was never allowed to show it.¹ Riddell was of the same opinion. 'It always appeared to me that the NCOs who were considered "Excellent,"' he observed, 'were those who had the most men for Orderly Room.' This environment of constant vigilance and suspicion did little to promote friendly attitudes between NCOs. 'The whole trouble about the pre-war army,' maintained Riddell, 'was fear. Privates for corporals and corporals for sergeants and so on. There was no trust among the troops, and as a result it was impossible to get the best out of the men.'²

Personal tensions, too, both between and within the different grades of the non-commissioned ranks, tended to prohibit close relations amongst NCOs. As in any tight-knit community there existed ill-feeling between individuals and few battalions were entirely free of personal jealousies and grudges. Of all the ranks, it was arguably the non-commissioned rank that was most likely to be afflicted by backbiting and vendettas. With the best part of two decades service under his belt, the career NCO had had ample time to cultivate a chip on his shoulder, be it the result of frustration at being passed over for promotion or the resentment over the humiliation at the hands of a superior.³ Such tensions should not be overstated, however. Personal animosity could not be allowed to cloud professional judgement. The efficient running of a battalion was dependent on the cooperation and mutual understanding of its NCOs and it is doubtful if working relations between the various grades were rarely anything other than cordial.

¹ Robert Edmondson, *John Bull's Army From Within*, London, 1907, p. 11.

² Riddell, memoir, pp. 10, 12, 21.

³ "An Ex-Non-Com", 'Rank and File Promotion Problems', *United Services Magazine* Vol. XLIV, 1911-12, p. 178; Riddell, memoir, pp. 23, 37.

1.5 What motivated men to become NCOs?

The relative scarcity of pre-First World War soldiers' memoirs means that we can only guess at the individual motives that drew men to the non-commissioned ranks. Ambition obviously drove many, dogged in pursuit of self-improvement or the enhanced status that had eluded them in civilian life. The glamour associated with the rank, embodied in the swaggering figure of the sergeant major, perhaps attracted others. Some no doubt discovered a talent for leadership that persuaded them to put in for a stripe, while there were those, be they singled out from the ranks for their sharpness on the parade ground or persuaded by the flattery of a superior, for whom the decision to join the non-commissioned ranks was made for them. For others, a stripe held out the prospect of greater responsibility and the chance of more intrinsically rewarding work than that which they had experienced as privates. Promotion was surely seen by some men to be, quite simply, a good thing in itself, while maybe a few decided, against the grain, to 'give it a go' after many years of service in the ranks. Certainly there was a handful of men every year who, too old or lacking the money or intelligence to follow the conventional route, pursued a commission via the back-door of the non-commissioned ranks.

It was probably the prospect of material reward, however, that persuaded the majority of men to take the first tentative step on the ladder of promotion. An increase in pay was the most obvious material inducement to promotion, though, as Table 1 reveals, the rank of lance corporal, the first rung on the non-commissioned ladder, carried with it no guaranteed immediate financial reward. A temporary appointment, the rank was, at least in the first instance, invariably unpaid and it was left to the discretion of commanding officers to decide if and when a lance corporal should receive his extra pay. E. Shail, who enlisted in the Dragoons in the last decade of the nineteenth century, served a full year and a half as an unpaid lance corporal.¹ Moreover, the three pence a day extra received by the lance corporal would, at first sight, appear a poor trade when set against the additional workload and responsibilities of the job. Yet the increase represented a 25% improvement on the wage of

¹ E. Shail, service papers, WO 97/5871, PRO.

the private. ‘It made all the difference,’ wrote one contemporary of the additional luxuries afforded him by his first stripe: ‘...the price of a good supper...and I indulged in a better brand of toilet soap’.¹ A further pay rise accompanied a second stripe. By 1901, a newly promoted corporal could look forward to a daily wage of 1s 5d, five pence a day in excess of his immediate subordinate and a full two-thirds more than that of a private.

The real benefits of a second stripe were more than financial, however. Still expected to indulge in any manual labour resulting directly from his craft, the junior NCO was nevertheless excused the scores of thankless chores which made the ordinary soldier’s life so irksome: the cleaning out of latrines, the sweeping of officers’ and sergeants’ messes, the washing of pots and polishing of floors.²

Table 1: Basic daily rates of pay for infantry NCOs and privates between the years 1878-1913.

Rank	1878	1901	1913
RSM	3s 6d	5s	5s
Csgt	2s 7d	3s	3s 6d
Sgt	2s 1d	2s 4d	2s 4d
Lsgt (if paid)	N/A	N/A	2s
Cpl	1s 4d	1s 8d	1s 8d
Lcpl (if paid)	1s 3d	1s 3d	1s 3d
Pte	1s	1s	1s

Source: ‘By one of them’ ‘Our Non Commissioned Officers’, p. 109; W. E. Cairns, *The Army from Within*, London, 1901, pp. 119-20; HMSO, *Royal Warrant for Pay of the Army 1913*, London, 1913, pp. 166, 194.

The junior NCO enjoyed, therefore, significant advantages over the private, but welcome though the extra cash and escape from a good deal of drudgery was, the richest rewards to be had from promotion were only fully realised when a man reached the rank of sergeant. Designed to both reward him for his achievements and confirm his status, the sergeant was granted a number of little considerations denied the corporal. He enjoyed, for one, the freedom of greater pass privileges. Unlike his junior counterpart who had to be in by reveille unless granted special permission, the sergeant was allowed out of barracks until midnight (colour sergeants were also permitted to wear plain clothes when on pass). The sergeant, if he so wished, had the option to employ a batman to service and clean his

¹ Hawke, *From Private to Major*, London, p. 67.

² ‘An Ex-Non-Com’, ‘The Case for the N.C.O.’, *United Services Magazine*, Vol. XXXI, 1905, p. 557.

equipment, in the process freeing up time for more leisurely pursuits. Another not inconsiderable privilege granted to senior NCOs, or at least a significant percentage of them, was the permission to marry 'on the strength'. In exchange for performing some shift work, most typically in the battalion laundry, the wives of all warrant officers and staff sergeants had their board and lodging paid for by the army: a considerable saving granted to neither private nor corporal.¹

Added to the list of officially sanctioned benefits were the numerous hidden 'extras' which, by virtue of his pivotal position in the army's chain of command, came the sergeant's way; usually, it has to be said, at the expense of the ranker. The deductions for 'damaged' kit; the post-parade refreshments provided to naive new recruits, the cost of which would be later debited from their first day's pay; the back-handers that ensured a punishment drill was 'forgotten'; the punitive 200% interest recouped on a - strictly illegal - loan made to a private, all went some way towards making the prospect of three stripes an attractive one.²

Without doubt the biggest gain to be had from the acquisition of a third stripe, however, was the entry it afforded to that most exclusive of private members' clubs, the sergeants' mess.³ An institutional stronghold, heavy with tradition and rich with privileges, the sergeants' mess was, socially and materially, a quantum leap from the environment of the barrack. Set alongside the recreational quarters of the private - and, for that matter, the corporal - even the most basic examples of their kind were Sybaritic by comparison. Comfortable chairs to recline in, writing desks at which to pen a letter, a billiard table on which to play a frame or two and share the day's regimental gossip, were all standard fixtures and fittings. The most luxurious messes, typically those enjoyed by battalions stationed in India, bordered on the sumptuous. Of his time spent in the East, Horace Wyndham remembered a sergeants' mess furnished with expensive curtains, walls adorned by pictures

¹ *Standing Orders of the Second Battalion The Welch Regiment*, pp. 16, 60; *Standing Orders of the 2nd Battalion The King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry*, p. 94.

² Garrod, memoir, pp. 6, 14; W. Robson, *A Tutor to prepare Non-Commissioned Officers for Examinations for Promotion*, London, 1904, p. 9; Edmondson, *John Bull's Army*, p. 27.

³ The sergeants' mess was strictly off limits to rankers and junior NCOs, and even officers were allowed in only by invitation; a restriction still unchanged in the 1950's. T. T. Paterson, *Morale in War and Work*, London, 1955, p. 237.

and a lounge area ‘artistically covered with card tables, divans, easy chairs and plants, the silver cups arranged on two large mirrored side boards making a luxurious background to a nicely fitted room’.¹

Sergeants’ messes, at home and abroad, were self-financing. NCOs typically paid an initial sign up fee of three days pay followed by a regular monthly subscription. With the exception of the lance sergeant, whose ‘corporal’s’ pay the messing subscription might have stretched, all other sergeants and warrant officers were obliged to join.² Monthly premiums varied according to the package desired. For dining members the charge was a shilling; half as much for non-diners. For those wishing to use the mess sports facilities - most messes had their own football pitch, billiards table, some even tennis courts - the levy was 1s 6d.³ The mess consequently had a healthy budget at its disposal, much of which was spent on maintaining a well-stocked larder of fresh vegetables, generous cuts of beef, and an unlimited supply of tea and bread and butter, all of course served on plates and cups and saucers rather than the all-purpose canteens of the barrack.⁴ Each sergeant took a turn as mess caterer, ordering and taking delivery of supplies. It was a job that was viewed less as a burden than a rather lucrative perk, offering ample opportunity as it did for ‘skimming off.’⁵ Abundant with food, the sergeants’ mess was never short of liquor. Some messes struck a deal with a local supplier and were able to buy their booze at cost price, which helped to keep lubricated the seemingly endless round of social events - be they smoking concerts, picnics or balls - staged by the mess.⁶ Unlike the barrack canteen, which had an embargo on the sale of spirits, all sergeants’ messes were permitted to sell both beer and spirits, a concession that provided

¹ “*The Acorn*”. *The Monthly Magazine of the 2nd Battalion, 22nd (Cheshire) Regiment*, Vol III, No. 1 Jan 1909, p. 59.

² Gordon, *Sergeant’s Pocket Book*, p. 133

³ *Standing Orders of the 2nd Battalion The King’s Own Yorkshire Light Infantry*, p. 54; “*The Acorn*”, p. 11.

⁴ Given that it was the senior NCO who was in charge of its distribution, it should come as no surprise that mess produce bought from members’ subscriptions was supplemented by the best quality army rations. This was a practice that proved a major source of grievance for the private soldier, whose meagre ration was disdainfully viewed as ‘sergeant’s leftovers’. Wyndham, *Queen’s*, p.205; “Ex-Non-Com”, ‘The food of the soldier’, *United Service Magazine*, Vol. XXXIII, 1906, p. 663.

⁵ Acland-Troyte, *Through the Ranks*, p. 133; Edmondson, *John Bull’s Army*, p. 27.

⁶ Civilians could be invited into the mess on a Sunday, an attractive proposition when early closing limited drinking time, and supplying liquor at cost price may have been seen as a fair exchange for a regular invitation to the mess. Gordon, *Sergeant’s Pocket Book*, p. 134.

further confirmation, if any was needed, of the gulf in status between the middle and lower ranks.¹

The many immunities and privileges accorded the NCO were nevertheless insufficient to persuade every man to volunteer for a stripe. For the individual determined to carve out a career in the army it made sense to aim for the rank of NCO, with its prospect of long term benefits. But many privates never gave serious consideration to promotion. Men who had joined up seeking to leave behind the responsibilities of civilian life sought not the stripe that would complicate matters, but the anonymity of the ranks where they could keep their heads down and serve out their time. Even those who toyed with the idea of promotion soon recognised that, attractive though the prospect of better pay, a pension and a seat in the sergeants' mess was, to reach the apex of the non-commissioned ranks was likely to be a long haul, and the concept of deferred gratification was not one that sat comfortably with the working class recruit.

It was, however, less the realisation that it was likely to take him the best part of a decade to reach the pinnacle of his profession that dissuaded the ranker from taking a stripe, than the unpalatable prospect of a year or more spent as lance corporal. A number of factors conspired to make the rank a most daunting one. Excused many of the tedious chores that had fallen to him as a ranker, the newly promoted lance corporal merely succeeded in swapping one form of drudgery for another. His new duties placed him at the beck and call of both the corporal and the sergeant, their mutually conflicting demands making his job at times virtually impossible.² But the NCO's additional duties failed to carry with them an increase in status. Unpaid in the first instance, the rank of lance corporal was seen by many as but a ranker with added responsibility, a man who worked hardest for the least reward. Not without justification, was the rank commonly referred to as 'half of nothing'; especially by old hands

¹ Wyndham, *Queen's*, p. 205.

² Legh, *Simple Guide to Interior Economy*, p. 18; Wyndham, *Queen's*, p. 156, Acland-Troyte, *Through the Ranks*, p. 98, Lucy, *Devil in the Drum*, p. 65. 'Is being made a N.C.O. another form of corporal punishment?' was a question posed by one wartime regimental journal. "*The Outpost*". *Magazine of the 17th Service (Glasgow Chamber of Commerce) Battalion Highland Light Infantry*, No. 2, March, 1915, p. 33.

who, in the opinion of one veteran, 'extend to these 'appointees' only just as much respect as they consider absolutely necessary for the safety of their own skins'.¹

It was the lance corporal's close proximity to the ranker that most undermined his status. The rank was something of a paradox in that though of all the NCOs the lance corporal had the fullest contact with his men, he possessed the least authority over them. The authorities recommended the newly promoted man tactfully abandon his old relations with his men, but that was easier said than done when, in every way, lance corporal and ranker were bound together. Virtually his every waking hour, on duty and off, the junior NCO was obliged to spend in the company of the ranker. He shared the same barrack as the private, ate from the same table and relieved himself in the same urinals. His new subordinates were, moreover, often his former friends. The young NCO lived with men he had known perhaps since enlistment or even childhood, men with whom he had drunk and gambled. In such company the temptation must have been great for the newly promoted man to turn a blind eye to all but the worst offences.²

Like the lance corporal, the nature of his duties and responsibilities brought the sergeant into close and frequent contact with the ranker. Unlike his junior counterpart, however, the sergeant had the sanctuary of his mess to escape to when he knocked off duty, and with it the distance which served to underline his authority. The lance corporal enjoyed no such respite. Bound to the ranks during his working day, the junior NCO was obliged to spend his off-duty hours sharing the barrack canteen with the private soldier. The authorities were aware of the difficulties faced by the lance corporal. They recognised that the prospect of having to both share quarters with and give orders to troops of dubious character dissuaded

¹ Wyndham, *Queen's*, p. 159.

² In the early 1870's, the army, as part of its attempts to raise recruitment, began the reorganisation of its administrative structure. The country was divided into 66 districts, with each regiment based in and recruited along county lines. The rationale underpinning the reforms was that battalions raised and stationed locally were likely to foster a local pride, which would in turn raise enlistment. Moreover, they would, it was thought, prove a more attractive proposition to men fearful of being lost to their family by being posted to a distant part of the country (under the previous system men enlisted at their local depot but were then posted to the regiment with the most urgent demand for manpower). One consequence of the reforms was that men who had enlisted together now remained together in the same unit. B. J. Bond, 'Recruiting the Victorian Army 1870-92', *Victorian Studies*, V, no.1, Sept. 1962, p. 333.

many men from taking the rank.¹ In an effort to circumvent the problem, some battalions introduced separate sleeping cubicles for corporals, permitting them a greater degree of privacy - sufficient at any rate to sneak a woman into unnoticed.² Some attempt, too, was made to give the corporal an alternative to the barrack canteen. Corporals enjoyed no equivalent of the sergeants' mess, but most battalions set aside a recreation room of sorts for the exclusive use of junior NCOs. In most cases little more than an extension of the barrack canteen, some were nevertheless well furnished and roomy enough to lay on a Smoking Concert or two.³

But life for the newly promoted man continued to be tough. The difficulties facing the lance corporal were such that some observers went so far as to advocate a temporary apartheid, allowing the new lance corporal a period of time away from his company to acquire and develop the skills needed for the enforcement of discipline; skills, it was maintained, he could not hope to gain in the company of old soldiers and former friends.⁴ Yet, though the authorities recognised the fragility of the newly promoted NCO's authority, they also knew that to remove him to another unit would have removed his chief function. Barrack-room discipline was the corporal's main priority: he was the eyes and ears of the military authority. Ultimately, whether the newly promoted man succeeded or failed rested on his own strength of character. Indeed, the army's no more than piecemeal attempts to improve the status of the lance corporal reflected its belief that the rank should serve as a tough apprenticeship. The lance corporal had been chosen on his merits and the authorities had no interest in seeing him fail. But that was not an excuse to wet-nurse him. Establishing authority over former friends, and balancing tact with bluster were all part of the rank's necessary learning curve. The rank, needless to say, proved to be a tough apprenticeship that not all completed and casualty rates amongst junior NCOs were high.⁵ Some threw in the towel quickly, the extra work and

¹ Minutes of Proceedings for Army Council, 1910, WO 163/15, PRO.

² "*The Wasp*", 10.7.55; Richards, *Old Soldier Sahib*, p. 46.

³ "*The Acorn*", Vol. III, No. 1, Jan. 1909, p. 41; "*The Antelope*", Vol. X., No. 2, April 1911, p. 72.

⁴ "An Infantry Adjutant", 'Training of the Officer and NCO', *United Service Magazine*, Vol. XXXVI, 1907-8, p. 492; Byrne, 'Boy-sergeants', p. 836.

⁵ "Anon", *Experiences of a Soldier*, 1890, 7008-13, National Army Museum, p. 14.

burden of responsibility too great; others made a fist of it but realised that the canteen was preferable to the library sweating for exams; doubtless there were some for whom jibes and intimidation from old hands forced a request to reversion to private. But for those with the steel to see through this toughest of apprenticeships, the sergeant's mess was now within sight.

1.6 NCO promotion

The less attractive facets of the non-commissioned rank, imagined or otherwise, minimised competition and openings were generally readily available for those seeking promotion. Legislation passed in 1870 served to further reduce the competition for places. That year saw the Army Enlistment Act passed under the guidance of the reforming Secretary of State for War, Edward Cardwell. The soldier's terms of enlistment was one amongst many issues which the act sought to tackle. The 12-year term of enlistment introduced in 1847 had proved unsuccessful. Its failure to attract the desired significant increase in numbers was blamed largely on the fact that potential recruits feared that after a full decade and more with the colours they would find it difficult securing employment in the civilian workplace. Cardwell's answer to the problem was to retain the 12-year term, but those troops serving in Britain would now, should they so wish, pass into the Reserve after three years with the colours (in India, where it was deemed essential to have men of a higher degree of training and expertise, the term was six years). The effect of 'short service' on both the army in general and the NCO in particular was significant. Instead of raising recruitment, the shorter period of enlistment actually led to a decline in numbers since soldiers were now effectively given an opportunity to prematurely terminate their military careers. 'Short service' had, unsurprisingly, the negative effect of promoting a short term outlook amongst rankers. But for

those keen to carve out a career for themselves, the competition for non-commissioned posts was now reduced.¹

The army laid down no minimum age restriction on eligibility for the rank of lance corporal, nor did it formally prescribe a minimum term of service in the ranks as a condition of acceptance. Some commentators advocated a minimum of 4 or 5 years of close scrutiny in the ranks, anything less, it was suggested, being insufficient time to know the job of the private and prove oneself a disciplined soldier.² Two years service in the ranks, though, was the tacitly recognised basic requirement for a man wishing to embark on a non-commissioned career. Many men nevertheless gained their first stripe after less than a year's service, while some were promoted after just six months. A very small minority succeeded in making lance corporal after only two months.³ 'My fragile figure and boyish face did not fit in with the possession of a stripe,' remembered one junior NCO. 'Several times I was meant to overhear old non-coms.. .wanting to know what the Army was coming to.'⁴

For appointment to the rank of lance corporal, the procedure was straightforward. When a vacancy arose the colour sergeant would recommend a man for promotion and, as a rule, the commanding officer would accept the advice of his senior NCO.⁵ Candidates who had shown smartness on parade, were industrious, well-disciplined and in possession of a clean charge sheet would be singled out as potential NCO material and awarded a first stripe. The rank of lance corporal, the first rung on the non-commissioned ladder, was technically not a rank at all but a temporary appointment. The lance corporal served a probationary period during which time senior NCOs and officers could form an accurate opinion of his suitability for the position of full corporal. Any one of a number of variables, some measurable, others less so, might decide the length of time a man remained a lance corporal. The unexpected

¹ Bond, 'Recruiting the Victorian Army', p. 334. In 1906 the old terms of service were re-introduced, with both infantrymen and cavalrymen signing up to 7 years in the colours followed by 5 in the reserve. Spiers, 'The regular army', p. 39; "Anon", 'The officers of the army, past and present', *United Service Magazine*, Vol. 1, 1881, pp. 98-9.

² Acland-Troyte, *Through the Ranks*, p. 295; "By One of Them", 'Our Non-Commissioned officers', pp. 98-100.

³ F. W. Thurley, service papers, CRT 140/54, BCRO; "By One of Them", 'Our Non-Commissioned Officers', p. 103; W. F. Reed, service papers, WO 97/5871, PRO.

⁴ Hawke, *From Private to Major*, p. 68.

⁵ Wyndham, *Queen's*, p. 154.

promotion - or demotion - of a superior might serve to propel a man forward, while personal feelings of insecurity no doubt held back others, unsure of their own ability or whether a stripe was really for them. Whatever the reasons holding him back or propelling him forward, the pre-war lance corporal typically served an average of eighteen months in the ranks before gaining a second stripe.¹

Any man wishing to move up a second rung on the non-commissioned ladder had to possess a basic level of formal education. Introduced as early as 1861 as part of the army's commitment to raising the educational standards of the ranks, the Army Certificate of Education was a compulsory requirement for all aspiring NCOs. The qualification was divided into three classes: first, second and third. A man had to be in possession of or in the process of working towards a third class certificate to be eligible for the rank of corporal. On the face of it the examination was undemanding, requiring candidates do no more than demonstrate a rudimentary grasp of literacy and numeracy. Candidates were made to pen a letter, spell simple words, read aloud and put to paper a simple dictated narrative; a few simple sums of addition and subtraction completed the test.² Yet, initially at least, the authorities were concerned that the paper was too demanding, and in 1868 a fourth class certificate was introduced. The requirements of the latter were, however, deemed so easy as to be virtually meaningless and it was discontinued in 1888.³ A second-class certificate, essential for the rank of sergeant, was slightly more challenging, demanding a grasp of percentages, fractions and interest, all of which were believed to be pre-requisites of successful regimental accounting.⁴ To reach the pinnacle of his rank, however, the sergeant had to gain a first-class certificate, an altogether more difficult proposition which served to highlight the more sophisticated demands of the rank of warrant officer. For the first-class certificate candidates were obliged to put to memory and paraphrase a substantial passage of English prose, were

¹ Service papers of J. Fennell, CRT 180/47, BCRO; J. Stapleton, FAC 101/1, BCRO; E. Hutchinson, FAC 127/1-2, BCRO; Thurley; E. Shail; F. Shambrook, WO 5871, PRO; H. A. Bangert, diary, 97/26/1, IWM.

² Col. H. C. C. D. Simpson, 'The education of the soldier', *Journal of the Royal United Services Institution*, Vol. LI, 1907, pp. 207-8.

³ Skelley, *Victorian Army at Home*, pp. 94-5.

⁴ "An Army Schoolmaster", *The Second Class Army School Certificate Made Easy*, Chatham, 1891.

catechised on a previously digested military campaign history or biography and were also expected to demonstrate a familiarity with more complicated arithmetic and a command of map reading.¹

For men with some schooling behind them, the exams for the third and second-class certificates presented few difficulties. Some found them so easy as to be insulting. Riddell finished second in his exam for corporal even though he left his paper half finished, while another candidate thought that ‘With the exception of the army spelling,’ the exam for the second-class certificate was one which ‘any child in the fifth standard could pass’.² Indeed, the second-class army certificate equated to a 4th class standard school certificate - that which a 12 year-old would sit.³ Yet many rankers struggled to reach that standard. Figures for the period 1907-13 reveal that an average of less than 30% of army recruits had the educational attainment of Standard V of elementary schools (11 year olds) or higher, while an average of 11% were illiterate.⁴ In 1913, as Table 2 indicates, almost 40% of that year’s intake was found to be either illiterate or barely literate.

Table 2: Educational class of recruits on enlistment, year ending Sept. 30th 1913.

Educational Class *	Number	Percentage
A	1570	6.0
B	6789	25.0
C	8130	30.0
D	7648	28.0
E	2956	11.0
	27,093	100.0

Source: (P)arliamentary (P)apers Cd.l 193, 1921, XX.

*Educational classes were defined as follows: A = ‘men of good education’, B = fair, C = moderate, D = inferior, E = illiterate.

The difficulties which the army exams presented to men with little or no schooling should not therefore be underestimated. One contemporary knew of many aspiring sergeants attending classes for years in a vain attempt to acquire the second-class certificate:

¹ *Guide to Obtaining a First Class Certificate of Army Education*, Chatham, 1886, pp. 4-7; “Anon”, *The Third Class Army School Certificate Made Easy*, Chatham, 1889, pp. 7-11.

² Riddell, memoir, p. 25; “Anon”, ‘Experiences of a soldier’, p. 9.

³ Simpson, ‘The education of the soldier’, pp. 207-8.

⁴ *General Annual Report on the British Army for year ending 30th September 1913*, Cmd. 7252, lii, 1914, pp. 96,267.

‘...middle-aged corporals who had got third-class certificates, but were trying to qualify for sergeantships by getting second classes... Some of these unfortunates, who were splendid soldiers, fairly sweated over the difficulties of compound interest and rule of three. The big drops stood on their foreheads, and there was a dazed frown between their eyes, as they tried to comprehend the patient demonstrations of their teacher.’¹

The certificates proved unpopular with both NCOs, who saw them as a barrier to promotion, and officers, whose choice of NCOs they restricted.² In the estimation of some, the emphasis on written qualifications overshadowed less measurable, but more important qualities. A higher degree of education may have been required for specialist work but, it was argued, provided a man could read and write tolerably well, the nature of the NCO’s duties required him to have no more than a subsistence level of education. Of much greater importance was the ability to lead and inspire. ‘The class of NCOs we require,’ insisted one contemporary, ‘...are smart young lance-corporals or corporals who play cricket and football; are nice looking, smart soldiers, and have a good way and popularity with the men...we want character, not book learning.’³

The ranker shared the officer’s suspicion of book learning. Displays of intellect from one of their own smacked of ‘getting above one’s station’ and were likely to be met with hostility by working-class private soldiers who, in the words of one contemporary, troops ‘instinctively resented ambition because it made for inequality’.⁴ John Lucy, who quickly acquired a first-class certificate whilst still a private, confessed to being made to feel like a freak by his comrades, while any failure to come up to scratch in any of his ordinary duties his colour sergeant blamed on Lucy’s superior learning.⁵ Old-hands, especially, resented the

¹ E. C. Grenville Murray, *Six Months in the Ranks or the Gentleman Private*, Leipzig, 1882, p. 169. Of his wartime training with the Guards, Stephen Graham recalled an ageing sergeant who ‘ought to have risen long since to the rank of sergeant major, but could never master vulgar fractions’. S. Graham, *A Private in the Guards*, London, 1919, p. 31.

² “By One of Them”, ‘Our non-commissioned officers’, p. 102; “A Non-Commissioned Officer”, ‘Our Non-Commissioned Officers’, pp. 98-113.

³ Minutes of Proceedings for Army Council, 1910. The roots of the army’s anti-intellectualism lay in the public school ethos, which attached great importance to sporting pursuits as the foundation of character building and teamwork. G. Best, ‘Militarism and the Victorian public school’, in B. Simon and I. Bradley, *The Victorian public school. Studies in the development of an educational institution: a symposium*, Dublin, 1975, pp. 131-7.

⁴ Sgt-Major S. Wright, *The Non-Commissioned Officer’s Examiner*, London, 1895, p. 7.

⁵ Lucy, *Devil in the Drum*, p. 37.

sight of ‘young upstarts’ seeking to ‘get on’.¹ As a new recruit, R. G. Garrod quickly achieved the army 3rd and 2nd certificates in one sitting and, for his efforts, a punch on the nose from an old veteran.²

On the face of it, however, the exams appeared to signal the army’s commitment to adopting a system of promotion based on merit. Promotion still rested ultimately on the recommendation of a colour sergeant and the discretion of the CO, but questions were likely to be asked if a man with a first-class certificate lost out to one with the same service profile but an inferior education.³ There remained, however, far more to promotion than just educational success. On paper, a man’s opportunity for promotion was not governed by his precedence on the roll. Regulations recommended that promotion went to the man best fitted to the job, regardless of age or length of service, and even permitted for a man of high quality or exceptional aptitude to skip a grade.⁴ But in practice promotion was based on seniority rather than merit. Men tended to be promoted according to their length of service or their age - the two usually coincided — and not according to their ability. This was not necessarily a bad practice since it carried a degree of transparency. Each man knew who was next in line for promotion, which removed the possibility of favouritism playing a part. Moreover, experience and ability frequently went hand in hand. The man best suited to fill a vacant senior NCO post was often the man with the longest service. The seasoned NCO had learned his trade and possessed a full knowledge of the workings of the battalion and the traditions of the regiment. Indeed, some commentators advocated a statutory full 10 years of ‘apprenticeship’ for a corporal, under the slow but considered tutelage of a senior NCO; leaving the newly promoted sergeant the remaining 11 years of his service to translate his theoretical expertise into good practice.⁵

¹ Acland-Troyte, *Through the Ranks*, p. 103.

² Garrod, memoir, p. 4.

³ “Anon”, ‘The Present Lack of Good Non Coms’, p. 481.

⁴ *Standing Orders of the Second Battalion The Welch Regiment*, p. 16; *Standing Orders of the 2nd Battalion The King’s Own Yorkshire Light Infantry*, p. 58.

⁵ “By One of Them”, ‘Our non-commissioned officers’, pp. 98-100.

Whether the skills and nuances of the sergeant's rank were sufficiently apocryphal to warrant a full decade of training is, however, debatable. Some critics maintained that this typically lengthy period of on-the-job training reflected less the demands of the non-commissioned rank than the inadequacy of personnel: long service was a pre-requisite for no other reason than that any less time than seven years would have been insufficient for poorly educated men to absorb even the basics of the job.¹ In fact, the principal reason for the NCO remaining in the same grade had little to do with the need to learn the ropes. Men remained in the same grade for the simple reason that there was nowhere else for them to go. The fluidity of movement that characterised promotion between the junior non-commissioned ranks (from lance-corporal to corporal) slowed between the more senior NCO grades and ultimately stagnated at the apex of the rank. Whereas a man would typically reach full corporal inside 18 months, the corporal invariably took over 5 16 years to make sergeant; colour sergeants 8 years, while few men attained the rank of warrant officer inside a decade and a half of service.² This was in part to be anticipated. Seen as a pyramid, the promotional hierarchy of the non-commissioned ranks had far more vacancies at its base and centre than top: a battalion might typically have as many as 40 corporals and an equal number of sergeants (including lance ranks) on its roll, but never more than only two warrant officers.³ The limited opportunities for commissions from the ranks further exacerbated the problem, forcing the lid firmly down on the top ranks of NCOs and compressing the grades below.

Promotion above the rank of sergeant was therefore only ever possible if a senior NCO was commissioned, retired or died. NCO commissions were rare, however, and NCOs seldom retired before they had to. Men were required to serve 21 years to qualify for a full pension, but many time-expired senior NCOs chose to re-engage for a further 7 years. Table 3 shows that the man most likely to make a long-term commitment to the army was the NCO.

¹ "A Troop Sergeant-Major of Dragoons", 'Our Non-Commissioned Officers', p. 363.

² Service records of Fennell, Thurley, Stapleton, Hutchinson, Shambrook, Shail; Bangert, diary; E. C. Vivian, *The British Army From Within*, London, 1915, p. 51.

³ Colonel Hildyard, 'A Regiment of Infantry', *The Nineteenth Century*, Vol XXII, 1887, p. 104.

Table 3: Return of the number of Warrant Officers, Non-commissioned Officers and Men, retired from the Army on Pension (time-expired only) in each of the Ten Years 1894 to 1903.

Year of retirement	WOs	NCOs	Rankers
1894	86	777	360
1895	104	797	481
1896	114	845	413
1897	96	983	451
1898	84	1106	394
1899	82	737	298
1900	58	404	130
1901	83	769	282
1902	115	1390	634
1903	93	1172	519

Source: PP. Cd.845, 1905, XLVI.

In the ten year period after 1894, NCO pensioners outnumbered rankers by at least 2-1 in most years even though the ratio of infantry rankers to NCOs was in the region of 8-1. In principal, a pensioned NCO still had much to offer his battalion in terms of experience and expertise. But evidence suggests that many older NCOs made a less than valuable contribution to their units. One contemporary bemoaned the numerous ‘moss covered incurables’ whiling away their last few years in semi-retirement, devoid of ambition and with insufficient energy to contribute to the life of their regiment.¹ For some senior NCOs the army became less a place for advancement than a refuge from the outside world. Men feared the uncertainty of civilian life after a lifetime of having their needs provided for, and NCO careers were undoubtedly prolonged beyond their militarily productive life span.² The disproportionately high numbers of time-expired NCOs choosing to stay on served to further fur up the artery of promotion and there was little opportunity for young, imaginative and keen recruits to rise quickly to the top of the non-commissioned ranks.

1.7 The commissioning of NCOs

In 1871, at the height of Victoria’s reign, a veteran of the ranks observed that:

‘There are hundreds of well-educated and intelligent non-commissioned officers who have perhaps ventured life and limb in their country’s service, and who have a practical knowledge of their

¹ “Ex-Non-Com”, ‘Rank and File Promotion Problems’, p. 185.

² T. Lydon, a sergeant major of seven years and with almost two decades service, found himself a lowly messenger with the Board of Trade when he retired from the army in 1909. “XXX”. *Journal of the 1st Battalion East Lancashire Regiment*, June 1909, p. 15. See also F. C. Trench, *The DarkSide of Short Service*, London, 1887, p. 26.

profession, yet they have about as much chance of getting a commission as Count Bismarck has of being elected President of the French Republic.’¹

Even an individual so single-mindedly determined as William Robertson (whose meteoric rise through the ranks culminated in his being made Field Marshal) harboured severe doubts about his prospects: ‘I had cherished the hope of obtaining a commission, but,’ he despaired, ‘there seemed no more chance of this hope being realised than of obtaining the moon’.² An apparent assault on privilege, begun in 1881 with the Cardwell reforms and the removal of the purchase system, had promised to usher in a new dawn of competition and promotion based on merit rather than wealth and breeding. Yet, thirty years later the odds against a man from the ranks winning a commission were greater not less: only 2% of all regular officers commissioned in 1913 came directly from the ranks.³

Table 4: Commissions from the Ranks granted between 1890-1913 inclusive.

a. 2nd Lieutenants

Year	Cavalry	Infantry & Army Service Corps.	Royal Artillery and Engineers*	Total
1890	3	15	9	27
1891	6	6	9	21
1892	3	9	8	20
1893	4	13	8	25
1894	6	19	3	28
1895	1	23	0	24
1896	0	14	2	16
1897	0	8	1	9
1898	1	12	1	14
1899	1	11	12	24
1900	0	27	21	48
1901	1	19	16	36
1902	1	26	7	34
1903	0	14	2	16
1904	0	8	8	16
1905	0	6	9	15
1906	0	10	7	17
1907	0	10	4	14
1908	0	8	1	9
1909	0	11	3	14
1910	0	10	0	10
1911	0	14	4	18
1912	0	11	15	26
1913	0	7	4	11

¹ “A Voice From the Ranks”, *The British Army and What We Think Of It*, London, 1871, p. 14.

² Robertson, *From Private to Field Marshal*, pp. 29-30.

³ K. Simpson, ‘The officers’, in *Nation in Arms*, p. 64.

The quota for that year was not an aberration. Indeed, the figures for that year were, as Table 4a demonstrates, consistent with those for the previous decade. The cavalry was the most parsimonious in awarding commissions: a total of only five were issued in the 19 years before the war. But even the less exclusive arms of the infantry and Royal Engineers had shown a downward trend. Why?

4 b. Quartermasters and Riding Masters

Year	Cavalry	Infantry	Royal Artillery and Engineers	Other Corps*
1890	3	16	9	6
1891	3	24	9	9
1892	9	29	9	11
1893	4	22	6	4
1894	4	30	6	14
1895	12	28	8	26
1896	3	24	6	19
1897	2	25	10	11
1898	3	24	9	20
1899	4	21	7	50
1900	10	19	24	65
1901	12	29	15	24
1902	5	32	10	18
1903	8	26	8	7
1904	6	18	10	8
1905	3	10	6	8
1906	6	12	7	15
1907	0	8	7	15
1908	1	12	14	13
1909	2	21	1	15
1910	1	29	4	17
1911	3	21	13	19
1912	4	17	12	23
1913	4	26	6	30

Source: *General Annual Return of the British Army* PP. Cd.224, 1914, Vol. LI, p. 657.

* Army Service Corps, Royal Army Medical Corps, Army Ordnance Department, Army schools and Army Pay Department.

Two different types of commission were open to the ranker. The first, and by far the most frequently awarded, was that of quartermaster (known as riding-master in the cavalry). The rank of quartermaster carried the same designation as officers of equivalent rank, but its quite separate category in the Army List (see Table 4b) highlights its distinction. In reality it was an honorary rank with little prestige, reserved in the main for deserving, long-service NCOs close to retirement. It was also a non-combatant post. The quartermaster's principal

responsibility was the feeding, equipping and billeting of the battalion, which served to only diminish its status further.

The second, and 'proper', type of commission was that of second lieutenant, or subaltern. In the pre-war years the bulk of commissions proper came from the military colleges, with a significant minority coming direct from the universities, the Special Reserve and the Territorial Force. The Victorian army placed an age limit of 26 on a candidate's eligibility for a commission, but by 1914 only those men aged between 21 and 23 years of age with no less than three years service were eligible.¹ This excluded the vast majority of NCOs. The pre-war NCO took, on average, a minimum of fifteen years to reach the pinnacle of the non-commissioned ranks, by which time he was too old to contemplate a commission. Technically, a commission was open to all ranks above that of private, and a young lance corporal who showed promise and quickly caught the eye of his superior might secure a commission in time. In practice however, as shown, the non-commissioned system of promotion based on seniority militated against leapfrogging and it was rare for any but the most senior NCOs to be ever considered for a commission in peacetime. Too old for a commission proper when his time did finally come, the man who had once shown potential as a lance corporal now had to settle for the rank of quartermaster.

Men who did meet the age criteria for a commission still had to prove their intellectual credentials. For those with an above average level of numeracy and literacy, the compulsory requirement of a first-class certificate of education was well within reach. But that was only the basic requirement. Candidates for a commission had also to negotiate a formal examination, the content of which tended to be weighed against the candidate from the ranks. The exam demanded knowledge of military law, battalion administration and map reading, all of which were within the NCO's range of experience. But candidates were also expected to display a sound knowledge of tactics and field engineering, knowledge of which a

¹ Army Order 1, Jan. 1914, WO 123/56, PRO.

young NCO would have had little opportunity to acquire.¹ Indeed, finding time to prepare for the exam itself was a struggle. Unlike the cadet at a military college whose preparation for a commission was a full time pursuit, the NCO had to find time outside of his normal duties.

For those young, able and diligent enough to secure a commission, the stiffest hurdles lay ahead. The purchase system may have gone but promotion remained largely dependent on income. A commission entailed an extreme financial sacrifice in the short term. The expenses of uniform and kit were considerable and difficult to find on an NCO's wage, especially for relatively older men with the likely additional baggage of a family to carry.² The newly commissioned ex-ranker had invariably to secure a loan from his regiment to cover the cost of his kit, which on a lieutenant's salary of 8s 6d was not easily repaid.³ Indeed, the cost of maintaining a commission left little manoeuvre for the repayment of debts. An infantry officer who lived frugally, retiring from his officers' mess before the post evening meal drinks, could just about manage to subsist on his modest salary. A second lieutenant in the more prestigious cavalry arm could not hope to. All cavalry officers, regardless of their rank, were expected to live up to the standard of the regiment, contributing fully to the maintenance of their regimental mess and its attendant social events. Social ostracism and, ultimately, banishment from his regiment were the likely consequences for a cavalry officer whose limited resources obliged him to refuse an invitation to a ball or race meeting. It was taken for granted, too, that cavalry officers would play polo, a recreation that required the purchase and upkeep of at least two horses. Unsurprisingly, many junior cavalry officers opted to take up a first post in India where distractions were fewer and expenses lower.

The prohibitive costs of a first commission did not go unnoticed by the authorities. The army advocated, in the event of a future war, sending commissioned NCOs to the front rather than remaining at the depot, since 'an officer can live on his pay in the field though not

¹ HMSO, *Regulations Under Which Warrant Officers And Non-Commissioned Officers Of The Regular Army May Be Promoted To Combatant Commissions Second Lieutenants*, London, 1914, p. 4; Acland-Troyte, *Through the Ranks*, p. 166.

² "Anon", 'Promotion from the Ranks', *United Service Magazine*, Vol II, 1887, p. 412.

³ Field Marshall Lord Carver, *The British Army in the 20th Century*, London, 1998, p. 162.

at home'.¹ In 1910, at a time when the army's recruitment shortage was a source of much head-scratching, the authorities discussed the likely benefits of an increase in the number of commissioned rankers. A better class of ranker, it was suggested, would be attracted by the prospect of commission. But the prospect of a reduction in the expenses of regimental life to make way for more commissioned rankers was dismissed for fear that 'the present class of officer would not be forthcoming'.²

The army's desire to maintain the social exclusivity of its officer class was not born purely from snobbery. It was an article of faith in the British pre-war army that only a gentleman was capable of possessing the attributes necessary to becoming an officer; innate qualities and instincts of which the middle and upper classes held a monopoly. The ranks were almost to a man drawn from the working class and that class was seen by the army to be demonstrably lacking in the qualities of an officer and a gentleman.³ The authorities were convinced, also, that the private soldier would only follow an officer who was a gentleman. The working class ranker, they believed, recognised and accepted that the middle and upper classes possessed the superior intelligence and better education and were therefore best placed to think and act on his behalf. A man of humble origin promoted 'above his station' prompted disquiet in the ranks, since his advancement served to question the 'natural' order of things.⁴

The army conceded that the mere fact of being an officer did make a man a gentleman, but the suspicion persisted that even the very best NCOs would fall short of what was required of the rank.⁵ NCOs with impeccable records, men who had won their right to a shot at a commission purely on merit, received a compulsory grilling before final acceptance. Commanding officers were reminded that the success of the newly commissioned man

¹ Minutes of Proceedings for Army Council, 1910; J. K. Trotter, 'The Submerged Subaltern', *Nineteenth Century*, April 1912, pp. 706-18.

² Minutes of Proceedings for Army Council, 1910.

³ "Anon", 'The Officers of the Army, Past and Present', p. 54; "An Infantry Adjutant", 'Training of the Officer and NCO', p. 494.

⁴ Minutes of Proceedings for Army Council, 1910; C. Hibbert (ed.), *The Recollections of Rifleman Harris*, Moreton-in-Marsh, 1998 edn., p. 28.

⁵ Gen. C. P. de Ainslie, *Life as I have found it*, Edinburgh, 1883, p. 47.

‘cannot always be assumed just from having an excellent character, and shown ability and trustworthiness during his service in the ranks’.¹

Indeed, it was the former NCO’s very association with the ranks that tarnished him in the eyes of the authorities. On the face of it, the ex- NCO’s experience of the ranks should have been seen as a profitable apprenticeship for the new officer. It provided him with the opportunity to acquire a thorough knowledge of the intricacies and workings of the battalion, its command structure and the different links in the chain of authority. Most importantly, the NCO’s years in the ranks had enabled him to gain an intimate knowledge of his men; and perhaps all men for that matter. He understood the cheating and trickery in the ranks, knew the petty grievances harboured by old timers, and was too familiar with the habits of the private soldier to be deceived by any malingerer. But, what their French counterparts viewed as a positive, indeed essential, experience - insisting, in fact, that all officer cadets serve a year in the ranks as part of their training - the British authorities viewed with suspicion.² The British army remained of the opinion that the skills acquired working as a NCO were insufficient to compensate for the bad habits picked up along the way. ‘Most men,’ observed one contemporary officer, ‘lose more than they gain, in self-reliance, in manner, in polish - even in speech. We have known, for instance, a bom gentleman, who after three years in the ranks had utterly lost the proper use of the letter “h.”’³ In short, the man could be taken out of the ranks, but it was impossible to take the ranks out of the man.

The few former rankers who did manage to successfully negotiate the many obstacles to a commission were greeted by their new colleagues with the same air of suspicion. Doubtless, most men entering the officers’ mess of their new unit for the first time received a cordial enough welcome. But commissioned rankers were rarely embraced as one of their own by officers who had followed the conventional route to a commission, and beneath the veneer of formal respect there was often hostility and prejudice. William Robertson, who

¹ *Queen’s Regulations*, 1893, p. 60.

² “Anon”, *Visit of an officer to France to study the French system of training NCOs for commissions*, WO 32/8386, PRO.

³ Cpt. G. J. Younghusband, *The Queen’s Commission*, London, 1891, p. 52.

served as a troop sergeant major with the 16th Lancers in the late 1880's before winning a commission and a posting to India, remembered that the financial difficulties associated with a commission caused him less misery than did the cool reception he received from his fellow officers.¹ Robertson was unflagging in his struggle to win acceptance, sweating to acquire the necessary social graces and devoting his every spare hour to acquiring the education required of an officer and gentleman. Try as he might, however, Robertson found it impossible to penetrate an insulated culture whose old school tie relationships guaranteed his exclusion.²

Elite cavalry units like Robertson's prided themselves on their social exclusivity which, as Table 4a shows, was total by 1903. But prejudice towards the commissioned ranker existed even in less fashionable infantry regiments. Richards recalled that his battalion RSM's promotion to quartermaster did not entitle him to a regular seat in the Officers' Mess. Instead he was 'invited' to dine only once a week on 'Guest Night'.³ In some cases financial obstacles led to self-imposed ostracism; in the process saving awkwardness.⁴ The army's policy of posting newly commissioned men to other units served in some small part to cover the tracks of the former ranker. The working class man could never disguise his origins, however. He was continually being betrayed by his accent, tastes, habits, jokes, relations, friends (or lack of them), enforced parsimony, or whatever.⁵ Dropping one's h's was the classic giveaway. Rumour has it that Robertson became so tired of the charade that he took to exaggerating his accent so as to reaffirm roots — and possibly to remind people of his achievement. Unsurprisingly, faced with the combined obstacles of money and prejudice, many refused the prospect of a commission. The senior NCO, at the pinnacle of his rank and highly respected for it, was unlikely to sacrifice status, a not insubstantial pension and a network of close friends for an uncertain future of poor promotion prospects and a purgatorial existence in the officers' mess.

¹ Robertson, *From Private to Field Marshal*, pp. 30-31.

² V. Bonham-Carter, *Soldier True*, London, 1963, p. 30.

³ Richards, *Old Soldier Sahib*, p. 156.

⁴ "Anon", *Our Depot Battalion. For Old Soldiers*, London, 1889, p. 32.

⁵ Bonham-Carter, *Soldier True*, p. 30.

Chapter 2: The NCO and training for war

In just over four years of war the British Army was transformed from a small, elite force of professional soldiers into a mass army of citizen volunteers and conscripts. The four infantry divisions and single cavalry division that made up the original British Expeditionary Force consisted of professional soldiers augmented by Regular reservists recalled to the colours. By October 1914, the BEF had been joined in the field by the first battalions of the Territorial Force, a body of part-time, amateur soldiers originally intended for home defence. The Territorials were in turn followed by units of the first New Army (or Kitchener's army), a volunteer force whose first division, the 9th (Scottish), arrived on the Continent in the spring of 1915. The introduction of compulsory service in 1916 completed the transformation of the British army, conscripts being absorbed into existing regular, Territorial and New Army battalions. Britain's peacetime army on the eve of hostilities had been less than three-quarters of a million men - 250,000 full time Regulars, 230,000 reservists and 245,000 Territorials. By the end of the conflict a total of 5,704,416 men had served in its ranks, seven-eighths of whom were volunteers and conscripts. In short, the army of November 1918 was unrecognisable from that of August 1914.¹

In the days immediately after Britain's entry into the war, the possibility of such a transformation would have appeared fanciful in the extreme. Initial confusion among would-be recruiters and the sluggishness of the British press to report allied setbacks meant that Kitchener's appeal on 7 August for 100,000 men was not answered with any great enthusiasm until late August and early September. Even then a number of socio-economic factors ensured that neither all classes nor all sections of the economy gave men equally.² The popular conception of a 'rush to the colours' has, therefore, to be qualified. Nevertheless, volunteer numbers still managed to reach a million by Christmas, more than enough to present an ill-

¹ HMSO, *Statistics of the Military Effort of the British Empire, 1914-1920*, 1922, p. 364; M. Samuels, *Command Or Control? Command, Training And Tactics In The British And German Armies, 1888-1918*, London, 1995 p. 149.

² P. E. Dewey, 'Military Recruiting and the British Labour Force During the First World War', *The Historical Journal*, 27, 1, 1984, pp. 199-200.

prepared and under-resourced army with huge managerial problems, not least of which was where to find sufficient NCOs capable of providing the burgeoning Kitchener and Territorial battalions with the necessary basic training and discipline.

At first, relatively few able-bodied regular NCOs were available, the majority being committed to France. A request was made to the Indian army for men to be spared (the 2nd Salford Pals received three NCOs from their Regular battalion, the 1st Lancashire Fusiliers, which had been in India at the outbreak of war), whilst NCOs were lent from Reserve battalions (3rd line feeder battalions for units on active service) and the Brigade of Guards to be sent on temporary attachment to volunteer units.¹ For the most part, however, the military authorities drew on a combination of those reservists deemed too old or unfit for active service and long since pensioned ‘dug-outs’, lured from retirement by the climate of patriotic fervour and a chance to bask in the warmth of an unexpected Indian summer. Reservists were especially desirable. Only recently departed from the service, they were generally familiar with their unit’s command structure, well versed in army procedure and likely to be up to speed on the recent changes in drill, key ingredients necessary for the basic training of new recruits.²

Of the ‘dug-outs’, former regular and Territorial NCOs up to 45 years of age were initially accepted with the age-limit extended a month later by five years to regulars above the rank of sergeant.³ For those men in need of a more concrete inducement than patriotism there was a minimum gratuity of £5 (some local authorities chose to offer four times as much) as to retired senior regular NCOs while reservists were promised £10 and an immediate start as corporal under the same conditions as their regular counterparts. All veterans were assured a posting, where possible, to a unit of their former corps.⁴ Recently pensioned men were in

¹ Adjutant-General to GOCs-in-C of Commands, 1.10.14, WO 162/3, PRO; Adjutant-General to Under-Secretary of State for India, 1.9.14, WO 162/3, PRO; M. Stedman, *Salford Pals. A History of the 15th, 16th, 19th & 20th Battalions Lancashire Fusiliers 1914-1919*, London, 1993, p. 38

² V. G. Ricketts, memoir, 68/14/1, IWM, p. 6; E. Wyrall, *The 17th (Service) Battalion Royal Fusiliers 1914-1919*, London, 1930, p. 4; E. Wyrall, *The East Yorkshire Regiment in the Great War 1914-18*, London, 1928, p. 22.

³ Adjutant-General to GOCs-in-C of Commands, 15.9.14, WO 162/3, PRO.

⁴ Army Order 375, 3.9.14, WO 123/56, PRO; D. Williams, ‘An Artilleryman’s War, 1914-19’, *Stand To*, 24, 1988, p. 24.

great demand but few in number and the crop of senior NCOs discharged to pension between 1902 and 1906 and attached to the 11th Battalion of the East Yorkshire Regiment was a more typical vintage.¹ It was in fact not unheard of for much older men to be temporarily re-enlisted, in some instances as old as seventy or more.² The numerical distribution of veterans was also something of a lottery. A few units were fortunate to have a surfeit of retired NCOs and reservists. The 16th Battalion, Royal Warwickshire Regiment had the services of almost sixty re-enlisted men, many of them of high calibre.³ New formations would more typically have a thin leavening of experienced NCOs capable of providing each of their four companies with temporary leadership.⁴ Other units, however, at least early on in their formation, possessed very few, if any, NCOs with service experience. The recruits of the 8th East Surreys, a 2nd New Army formation, reached Purfleet on 10 September 1914, ‘a thousand strong, with no officers, no non-commissioned officers — rather like a football excursion crowd...They knew no words of command’.⁵ Variations in the supply of NCOs were wide even within the same regiment. The 6th Green Howards had a fair share of seconded regular NCOs whereas its sister battalion, the 7th, had to make do with only a few re-enlisted men.⁶

Inevitably, the quality of the re-enlisted men proved uneven. Accounts by some contemporaries suggest that the man long absent from the colours had little to offer in the way of adequate military tuition. Ian Hay quipped that two NCOs in his unit appeared to have retired from active service ‘about the time that bows and arrows began to yield place to the arquebus’. The same sentiments were echoed, with barely more sobriety, by Guy Chapman, who claimed to have observed one time-expired man ‘giving the fire commands of 40 years

¹ “The Snapper”. *Journal of the East Yorkshire Regiment*, Vol. IX, Nov. 1914, p. 187; Vol. IX, Dec. 1914, pp. 215-6.

² J. Tindall, *The Sidmouth Volunteers 1914-1918*, Sidmouth, 1920, p. 13; L. McDonald “1914-18”: *Voices and Images of the Great War*, London, 1988, p. 54.

³ T. Carter, *Birmingham Pals: 14th, 15th and 16th (Service) Battalions of the Royal Warwickshire Regiment. A History of the Three City Battalions Raised in Birmingham in World War One*, Barnsley, 1997, p. 63;

G. Stewart and J. Sheen, *Tyneside Scottish: 20th, 21st, 22nd & 23rd (Service) Battalions of the Northumberland Fusiliers*, Barnsley, 1999, p. 54.

⁴ D. Bilton, *Hull Pals: 10th, 11th, 12th & 13th Battalions East Yorkshire Regiment*, Barnsley, 1999, p. 21; “The Outpost”. No. 2, March 1915, p. 32; No. 3, April 1915, p. 64; No. 4, May 1915, p. 114.

⁵ Lieutenant-Colonel A. P. B. Irwin, quoted in G. H. F. Nichols, *The 18th Division in the Great War*, London, 1922; see also *Cambridgeshire Territorial Gazette*, No. 3, July 1916, pp. 56-7.

⁶ G. Powell, *History of the Green Howards*, London, 1992, pp. 136-7.

before'.¹ Others were less flippant in their criticism. Basil Liddell Hart viewed the worst of the veterans less as humorous curiosities than as bad role models. 'Our CSM,' he wrote, 'had a habit of remembering some urgent office duty when a route march had gone as far as his feet and fatness would comfortably permit and would then hail any passing civilian motor car with the impressive shout, "On His Majesty's Service," and demand to be driven back to camp, regardless of where the driver might be going.'² Such concerns appear to have been well founded. The NCO was, as in peacetime, granted a near monopoly in the instruction of the new recruit. C. S. Lewis, an officer with a Special Reserve unit based in England, saw his own role in basic training as secondary to that of his NCOs. 'All you do,' he observed, 'is to lead your party onto parade, hand them over to their instructor, and then walk about doing nothing at all.'³

The volunteer recruit's first experience of army life was one which, be it good or bad, he was likely to remember well into the war and which might shape his future perceptions of those in authority. A poor senior NCO therefore had the potential to do a good deal of harm. In reality, however, the damage done by an inadequate dug-out was minimal. The recruit had but a short period of basic training (typically three months) under the supervision of a dug-out, after which the latter was generally tactfully disposed of. Responsibility for the training of the new recruit thereafter passed to either a regular NCO, returned from injury but no longer fit for active service, or a volunteer from the ranks, his probation as a junior NCO complete.⁴ Few recruits, what is more, were so impressionable as to be blind to the

¹ Hay, *The First Hundred Thousand*, London, 1915, p. 7; G. Chapman, *A Passionate Prodigality*, London, 1933, p. 5.

² B. Liddell Hart, 'Forced to Think', in G. A. Panichas (ed.), *Promise of Greatness*, London, 1968, p. 99.

³ Quoted in G. D. Sheffield, 'Officer-Man Relations, Morale and Discipline in the British Army, 1902-22', Ph. D. thesis, University of London, 1994, p. 247. This was a state of affairs that changed little throughout the war. A convalescing officer of the 4th East Yorkshires remarked of his stay at Scotton Camp near Catterick in 1917 that 'the NCO instructors do it all. We simply stand about and gape'. A. Wilkinson (ed.), *Destiny: The War Letters of Cpt. Jack Oughtred 1915-1918*, Bridlington, 1996, p. 77.

⁴ Callender, memoir, p. 15; G.V. Dennis, memoir, 78/58/1, IWM, p. 13. There were exceptions. If able bodied and not too old, dug outs were permitted to escort their units on active service. George Coppard's platoon sergeant in France, a police inspector in civilian life, had earlier worn medals from the Boer War during parade ground drill. G. Coppard, *With a Machine-gun to Cambrai*, London, 1986, p.8.

incompetence of a poor ‘dug-out’. Indeed it might be the retired NCO who suffered at the hands of the new recruit. W. Paterson, who enlisted with the Seaforth Highlanders, recalled a veteran sergeant who was ridiculed rather than respected, his human frailties cruelly exposed by a handful of subordinates who took advantage of his insobriety to leave him bound to his chair whilst he dozed in the regimental reading-room.¹ Doubtless there were many more such veterans whose resurrection proved ill-judged, but in the first few months of the war the authorities had few immediate alternatives open to them and urged commanding officers to display tact and patience towards the re-enlisted men.²

In fairness to the re-enlisted men, the social heterogeneity of the Territorial and New Armies threw up challenges that would have taxed the ablest regular. Britain’s peacetime army, as shown, drew its rank and file largely from a well of the unemployed and uneducated. The war, however, brought with it a significant change in the social composition of the lower ranks. Certainly, the first wave of recruits bore some similarity to the army’s traditional intake. Amongst those quickest to enlist in the months of August and September were the nation’s ‘aristocrats and the loafers’, the former unencumbered by economic concerns, the latter eager to escape them.³ But, as Table 1 indicates, white-collar occupations accounted for a significant minority of volunteers. Of the Kitchener units, V. W. Germaines conceded that the First New Army was populated largely by ‘the same class as the average run of Regular recruit’. He insisted, nevertheless, that the ‘social tone’ of the Second and Third New Armies was much improved.⁴ Amongst the volunteers in his section, J. B. Middlebrook, who enlisted with the Kings Royal Rifles in 1915, remembered a roughly even mix of blue and white collar occupations, amongst which were an accounts clerk, a steam wagon driver, a mill hand, a teacher, a gardener and a fellow theologian.⁵ Territorial units, too, contained a fair share of middle-class volunteers. Although it is a popular misconception that the Territorial force was

¹ W. Paterson, memoir, 89/7/1, IWM, p. 19.

² Adjutant-General to GOCs-in-C of Commands, 16.10.14, WO 162/3, PRO.

³ H. Cartmell, *For Remembrance*, Preston, 1919, p. 31; J. N. Hall, *Kitchener’s Mob*, Boston, 1916, p. 7.

⁴ V. W. Germaines, *The Kitchener Armies*, London, 1930, pp. 66, 134.

⁵ J. B. Middlebrook, letter, 21.11.15, con shelf, IWM.

a 'class corps' in terms of social composition (as Ian Beckett has shown, the Territorials, like the Volunteers before them, were overwhelmingly a working-class movement), some units, at least early on in their formation, were indeed made up mainly of middle-class men.¹

Table 1: Sectoral distribution of enlistment in the British forces. August 1914 to February 1916.

Occupation	Men employed July 1914 ('000)	Men who joined ('000)	% of pre-war labour force volunteering
Industry (Mines and Quarries)	6,165 (1,266)	1,743 (313)	28.3 (24.7)
Agriculture	920	259	28.2
Transport	1,041	233	22.4
'Commerce'*	1,249	501	40.1
'Professions' #	144	60	41.7
Entertainment	177	74	41.8
Central government	311	85	27.3
Local government	477	126	26.4
All occupations	10,484	3,081	29.4

Source: J. M. Winter, 'Britain's lost generation of the First World War', *Population Studies*, 31,3, 1977, p. 454.

* Wholesale and retail trade, banking and finance

Chiefly clerks in professional firms such as solicitors

Educated and confident and in many cases less used to receiving than giving instruction, the middle-class ranker was not afraid to question authority or query points of detail. H. Ogle, an Art teacher in civilian life who enlisted with the 7th Royal Warwickshire Regiment, felt some sympathy for his NCOs who were 'exasperated by our everlasting questions, our habits of putting unnecessary frills on the old stuff of Field Training and our strange ways in general.'² As Stephen Graham acknowledged, it was the middle-class volunteer who most perplexed and infuriated the re-enlisted NCOs:

'The task of the NCO or officer at the front in handling well-disciplined men is child's play compared with the task of breaking them in from civilised happiness and culture. The easiest to train are no doubt the youngest, those nearest to school-life, those accustomed to obedience in the family, in the workshop and factory. It is harder to discipline the developed working-man who has "rights" and grievances, who resorts to Trade Unions, and thinks his sorrows aired in John Bull can bring about a revolution. Clerks

¹ I. Beckett, 'The Territorial Force', in *Nation in Arms*, p. 145.

² M. Glover (ed.), *The Fateful Battle Line: The Great War Journals and Sketches of Cpt. Henry Ogle*, London, 1993, p. 12.

are on the whole a little more difficult to handle, though they are inclined to give in sooner than the working-man. Middle-aged men of any class need a hard battering to reduce their pride in self, their sense of being older. Professional men of any age are harder still, and I suppose musicians, artists, poets are often hardest of all and belong to a class of impossibles.¹

Several memoirs indeed cast doubt on the ability of the recalled NCO to fathom the mentality of the better-educated recruit.² But it is likely that the majority of recalled men viewed the more intelligent volunteer less as a threat than an irritant. Middle-class men remained, moreover, very much a minority of the volunteers and the working-class continued as it had always done to account for the bulk of the army's rank and file. Still, it was a less homogenous working-class intake than previously, one better skilled and more widely unionised (though three quarters of the male work force still remained non-unionized on the eve of war³) than the underclass of the peacetime army. Whether this served to render the wartime working-class volunteer a less biddable proposition than his pre-war predecessor is debatable. The wave of strikes and industrial unrest that characterised the late Edwardian era has been cited by some commentators as proof that Britain on the eve of war was no longer a cosy 'one nation' of garden parties and deferential servants, a place where the working man knew his place. Emboldened by a growing recognition of the value of his labour, the Edwardian blue-collar worker was, it is claimed, increasingly as likely to greet authority with a disdainful finger as a doffed cap.⁴ Other scholars remain less convinced. Ross McKibbin, for one, has pointed out that there existed 'no simple identity between union membership and political inclination'.⁵ As trades union members, working-class men, moreover, sought not the overthrow of the system, rather a better deal within it. Strikes in the workplace were triggered by material concerns - improvements in pay and conditions - not broader political issues. When it did materialise, working-class opposition to authority outside of the workplace was rarely self-consciously political; rather it remained personalised, levelled not at a distant,

¹ S. Graham, *A Private in the Guards*, London, 1919, pp. 4-5.

² Heath, memoir, p. 25; Lucy, *Devil in the Drum*, p. 280; J. B. Priestley, *Margin Released*, London, 1966 edn., p. 112.

³ R. McKibbin, *The Ideologies Of Class: Social relations in Britain 1880-1950*, Oxford, 1990, p. 3.

⁴ D. Read, *Edwardian England 1901-1915*, London, 1982, *passim*.

⁵ McKibbin, *Ideologies*, p. 3.

faceless establishment but at local figures of authority such as schoolteachers or the local bobby.¹ More often than not, members of the working-class set their sights even lower, venting their spleen on one another. Scurrilous attacks on neighbours, drunken brawls and gang fights were less evidence of a rejection of the ethos and values of the ruling class than the poverty of working class aspirations.²

That the working man was resigned to the inevitability of the prevailing social order came, however, as no surprise. Generations of political and economic inequality, unemployment, ill health and an early death in an often brutal workplace were realities which forced men to adopt a 'pragmatic' attitude to authority. The army was but the latest manifestation of a seemingly immutable class system. Officers had taken the place of management and the foreman was now an NCO, but the new private occupied the same subordinate position as he had done in civil life. The soldier's subordination was nevertheless not entirely unconditional. Certainly, men signed up to a military code far harsher than anything they had experienced in the workplace and by volunteering they may have given their implicit consent to the legitimacy of army authority. But they were far from being the ready made cannon fodder - the factory worker 'privates of the industrial army' - ready to exchange one form of conditioning for another. Men still expected to be treated with a degree of dignity, just as they had done in the workplace. Certainly, the soldier's deference was pretty much assured provided the army acknowledged his basic rights. Yet just as the factory owner's failure to provide a certain level of material welfare for his workers might result in the disintegration of deference, so too an army that failed to meet the basic needs of its troops might risk the loss of its moral authority.³ The military authorities would have to keep their side of the 'bargain' if the commitment of the British Tommy was to be sustained.

¹ S. Humphries, *Hooligans or Rebels*, London, 1981, p. 208.

² R. Roberts, *The Classic Slum: Salford life in the first quarter of the century*, Harmondsworth, 1973. p. 9. In *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists*, Robert Tressell displayed little sympathy for an Edwardian working-class he portrayed as a 'passive mass', backward in its outlook and apathetic to its predicament. R. Tressell, *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists*, London, 1991.

³ For a detailed explanation of the concept of deference, see H. Newby, 'The Deferential Dialectic', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 17, 2, 1975, pp. 139-64.

For their part, the authorities were anything but complacent about the new intake. They feared an influx of urban workers heavily influenced by trade unionist propaganda.¹ Major-General Sir Henry Wilson was scathing about Kitchener's 'mobs', declaring them incapable of being ready for action within two years.² If the consternation of the British Top Brass proved exaggerated in the long term, initially it was not entirely baseless. The disturbances at Preston in September 1914 in which miners from south Wales demanded the back-pay that was owed them indicate that men were not prepared to relinquish their rights as workers on enlistment.³ Traditions of radicalism and non-conformity perhaps rendered the Welsh miner a less pliant and more confrontational individual than other British troops, and his outspokenness and appetite for raising disputes may have been somewhat untypical of the majority of the army's working class intake.⁴ But incidences of unrest were not confined to units of men raised in the Valleys. 1915 saw a battalion of volunteers going on strike in response to the rough handling by drill instructors and even the '4th Public Schools' battalion disobeyed orders as a protest against rotten food.⁵

Anecdotal evidence would appear to confirm that the working-class volunteer, though quick to accept the army's disciplinary code, was not altogether passive. Freshmen like George Coppard, only sixteen on enlistment, failed to be chilled to the bone by the bellows of their NCOs. Coppard cultivated a 'baleful glare' to convey his contempt for a 'dug-out' drill instructor and, despite incurring a charge of dumb insolence, refined his rebelliousness to blowing muffled raspberries.⁶ Elsewhere, the confident, knowing Private E. W. Prosser recorded his disdain for a loud-mouthed regular NCO: 'I expect in pre-war times such a barrage of words was meant to terrify half-witted recruits. They left us unmoved. We even had a good laugh out of it.'⁷ Ironically, it was the man with service experience who was

¹ M. Howard, 'Europe 1914', *The Quarterly Journal of Military History*, 2, 2, 1980, p. 22.

² Sir C. E. Callwell, *Field Marshal Sir Henry Wilson, his Life and Diaries*, Vol. I, London, 1927, p. 178.

³ Cartmell, *For Remembrance*, p. 34.

⁴ G. Phillips, 'The Welsh Soldier in World War One', unpublished M. Phil., University of Aberystwyth, Wales, 1991, pp. 182-3.

⁵ Dallas and Gill, *The Unknown Army*, p. 81; C. Hughes, 'The New Armies', in *Nation in Arms*, p. 109.

⁶ Coppard, *Machine Gun*, p. 6.

⁷ Quoted in P. Simkins, *Kitchener's Army*, Manchester, 1988, p. 200.

perhaps most likely to expose any frailties in the make-up of the re-enlisted NCO. One contemporary recalled his NCO's desperate attempt to muster credibility in the face of the irreverent behaviour of an Australian who, fully aware of parade-ground emergency procedure, took three steps back from the line, broke wind loudly and returned smartly back.¹

Acts of open defiance by volunteers were nevertheless rare. Instances of insubordination invariably owed less to wilful subversion than to the new recruit's lack of comprehension of military protocol, as exemplified by the Welsh quarrymen whose habit of slipping away from their Territorial unit to tend their allotments doubtless drove their superiors to distraction.² The army responded with tolerance to such aberrations, in part out of sympathy for the volunteer who in his transition from civilian to soldier faced a steep learning curve, but mainly because circumstances obliged them to. As early as 1902, some commentators had predicted that a future major war involving Britain would demand a radical change in the mindset of the regular soldier.

'Our men will come straight from civil life,' wrote G. F. R. Henderson, 'and to civil life they will return. The habits and prejudices of civil life will have to be considered in their discipline and instruction, and officers will have to recognise that troops without the traditions, instincts, and training of regular soldiers, require a handling different from that which they have been accustomed to employ.'³

Certainly, punishment was modified to take account of the new recruits and offences that would normally have met with a harsh sentence were commuted in exchange for an undertaking of future good behaviour. A man found guilty of hurling tea in the face of a sergeant was only confined to barracks and given extra fatigues whilst another recruit charged with desertion received a mere 14 days hard labour.⁴ A degree of tact towards men who had chosen to fight voluntarily was to be anticipated and, driven to exasperation though some

¹ C. M. Bowra, *Memories 1898-1939*, London, 1966, p. 75.

² I. Beckett, 'The nation in arms, 1914-18', in *Nation in Arms*, p. 23.

³ Quoted in J. Luvaas, *The Education of an Army*, London, 1965, p. 228.

⁴ A. E. Perriman, memoir, 80/43/1, IWM, p. 2; J. Cooksey, *Barnsley Pals: The 13th and 14th Battalions York and Lancaster Regiment*, London, 1988p. 77; M. Stedman, *Manchester Pals. 16th, 17th, 18th, 19th, 20th, 21st, 22nd and 23rd Battalions the Manchester Regiment*, London, 1994, p. 41. For further examples of leniency by the authorities during basic training see H. Bartlett, memoir, 81/14/1, IWM, p. 35; Callender, memoir, p. 25.

were, NCOs were nevertheless encouraged to view the ‘over-exuberance’ of the volunteer as the necessary price of his commitment.

One observer went as far as to suggest that the enthusiasm of the volunteers and their eagerness to become proper soldiers actually obviated the need for strict regulation.¹ But the restraint displayed by the military authorities in matters of discipline owed more to pragmatism than altruism. NCOs were ordered to treat their new charges with civility since adverse comments from new recruits were likely to damage recruiting.² Moreover, keen though they were to fashion the New Army and Territorial battalions in the image of the regular army, the authorities had neither the means nor the time to do so. From the outset structural deficiencies left recruitment depots ill-equipped to deal with the influx of recruits. Available accommodation was over stretched and men were permitted to eat and even sleep at home. ‘You were more or less at liberty at first,’ remembered one veteran, ‘as long as you were there for parade next morning. We used to come home three or four nights a week, as long as we caught the first train back in the morning.’³ In some instances recruits were literally employed on a part-time basis and allowed to continue working in their offices.⁴ A deficiency of uniforms and equipment hindered even the most cosmetic change from civilian to soldier. Priority was given to regular units already on the battlefield, rendering clothing and kit scarce in most volunteer units. Rankers had to make do with temporary ‘uniforms’ of blue (postal worker) serge and wait for khaki while NCOs were forced to use armbands in place of chevrons. One veteran recalled that his sergeant major was distinguished from the rest of his men only by his ‘navy blue suit’ and ‘bowler hat’.⁵ Elsewhere, an officer of the 12th West Yorkshire Regiment, his unit bereft of the stripes and brassards that would differentiate NCO

¹ Germaines, *Kitchener Armies*, p. 135.

² D. Hankey, *A Student in Arms*, London, 1916, p. 44.

³ Cooksey, *Barnsley Pals*, p. 44; Heath, memoir, pp. 4, 6; G. Maddocks, *Liverpool Pals, 17th, 18th, 19th & 20th Battalions*, London, 1996, p. 32; Not all recruits could be so trusted. A volunteer with the Tyneside Scots who was billeted at home was discharged for his persistent refusal to turn up for long route marches. Stewart and Sheen, *Tyneside Scottish*, p. 67.

⁴ L. Macdonald, *Somme*, London, 1993 edn., p. 247.

⁵ W. H. Holloway, *Northamptonshire and the Great War*, Northampton, n.d., p. 93; S. Cloete, *A Victorian Son*, London, 1972, p. 198.

from ranker, took the bizarre step of appointing only those men with moustaches to the rank of lance-corporal.¹

Drill, too, lacked authenticity without the weapons to wield. One observer wondered how any man could truly 'feel like a soldier with a wooden toy to carry about...knowing that before parade it had already poked the fire, cleared the kitchen sink, beaten the dog, or proved of domestic utility in other ways.'² A battalion of the Liverpool Pals was luckier than many to be issued almost immediately with a small supply of the obsolete Lee Metford rifle, but even then it was the eve of the battalion's departure to France before each man received a modern rifle? Ironically it was Territorial units that often fared worst. Kitchener had deep reservations about Britain's Territorial Force (a force he described as a "Town Clerks' Army") whose limited military knowledge he viewed as a 'smattering of the wrong thing'. Kitchener's preference was for men with no knowledge at all and consequently the War Office was directed to give priority to the administration and equipping of New Army units.⁴ The shortage of equipment rendered meaningful training almost non-existent. Ivor Gurney believed that the sole aim of training was to tire men out, with 'no heed of teaching them anything'.⁵ With few purposeful training activities to occupy them beyond squad drill and route marches, recruits were allowed ample free time and troops in some New Army units were permitted to leave barracks after afternoon parade providing they had no additional duties to perform. Middlebrook claimed that he was actually encouraged to 'disappear', so little was there to keep him occupied.⁶

Perhaps the most crucial deficiency was that of regular manpower. In the opening months of the war whilst the New Armies trained and before Territorial units had taken to the field, it was left to Britain's regular army to bear the full brunt of the initial German advances. The losses of 1914 combined with those incurred during the Allied offensives of spring 1915

¹ Lt. Col. H. H. Hemming, unpublished account, 1976, PP/MCR/155, IWM.

² Powell, *Green Howards*, p. 137.

³ Maddocks, *Liverpool Pals*, p. 37.

⁴ Sir P. Magnus, *Kitchener: Portrait of an Imperialist*, London, 1968, p. 347.

⁵ M. Hurd, *The Ordeal of Ivor Gurney*, Oxford, 1978, p. 54.

⁶ L. Wilson, memoir, 86/30/1, IWM, p. 5; W. R. Acklam, diary, n.d., 83/23/1, IWM; Middlebrook, letter, 18.2.16.

meant that by then wholly regular units had all but ceased to exist. Consequently, the volunteer battalions suffered from a shortage of regular supervisors and instructors capable of inculcating the New Army battalions with the strict disciplinary ethos of the peacetime army. By contrast, temporary officers and NCOs, lacking the rigidity of outlook that characterised the regular soldier, were slow to absorb, and consequently impart, the strict disciplinary code of their regular counterparts.¹ Shortages of *materiel* and manpower, in short, made the conversion of civilian into soldier incomplete; the New Army and Territorial volunteers remained, at least for the period of their training, more civilians than soldiers.

Of course, not all men chose to volunteer with a Pals or Territorial unit. Those who elected to join the ranks of one of the prestigious Guards battalions entered a wholly different environment. Recruits embarking on the Guards' sixteen-week course of basic training encountered a strict, well-ordered regime, populated by old school regular NCOs, who refused to compromise discipline to accommodate the new intake. If anything, discipline was tightened. The new recruit, though allowed out at weekends, was confined to barracks during the rest of the week and for the first month of the course forbidden home leave, a prohibition which must have caused misery to men away from friends and family for the first time.² The new men nevertheless received little sympathy from their superiors. Norman Cliff, who volunteered with the Grenadier Guards, recorded that the regular NCOs eyed with deep suspicion the more intelligent type of recruit, whose civilian pretensions and individual conceits, in their estimation, had to be brutally stripped away. 'You may be God Almighty in Civvy Street but you're fuck all here', recalled Cliff of his less than hospitable welcome at the

¹ With regulars scarce, each battalion of the first of Kitchener's New Annies was allotted an average of only six serving regular officers; units of the Second and Third New Armies fared even worse, with few lucky to be assigned only one serving regular and most obliged to make do with the services of recalled staff. Samuels, *Command Or Control?*, p. 177; C. Hughes, *Mametz: Lloyd George's 'Welsh Army' at the Battle of the Somme*, Guildford, 1990 edn., p. 35; G. D. Sheffield, 'The Effects of War Service on the 22nd Battalion Royal Fusiliers (Kensington) 1914-18, with Special Reference to Morale, Discipline and the Officer-Man Relationship', unpublished M. A. thesis, University of Leeds, 1984, p. 37.

² P. Vemey, *The Micks*, London, 1970, p. 9; K. Briant, *Fighting with the Guards*, London, 1958, p. 20.

notorious Guards' barracks of "Little Sparta".¹ Stephen Graham too, endured a brutal introduction to army life at the hands of lance-corporals, who 'seemed to have power of life and death over us', their foul language, thought Graham, designed to do no more than bolster their own authority. The torment inflicted by the Guards NCOs was not confined to verbal insults. Though long since forbidden from laying hands on their charges, NCOs were guilty of corporal punishment. Graham recalled an instance of a private who, having been found guilty of falling short of the Guards' exacting standards of cleanliness, was forced to suffer the ignominy of a public scrubbing by the corporals.²

Discipline in the volunteer battalions, too, was tightened in due course as the War Office found its feet and began to cope with the influx of new recruits. Dug-out officers and volunteer NCOs were replaced by regulars from France and India (the forfeiture of a stripe was generally a temporary measure and most men who had stood down had their rank reinstated upon posting to their unit in France) who between them provided the New Army recruits with a tough 'finishing school'.³ Nevertheless, the combined shortages of *materiel* and regular personnel slowed the new recruit's conversion from civilian to soldier. The volunteer of 1914 adapted himself to his military duties but, unlike the pre-war soldier whose enlistment severed him from roots and family, the wartime recruit continued to enjoy home comforts and remained attached to the interests and duties that engaged him in civil life. Strict discipline and ordered routine, the norms of military life in the peacetime army, were lacking in the volunteer units during their first few formative months. In short, men were part-time soldiers at best. It came as little surprise then that many should take less than seriously their period of basic training.

The challenges facing the re-enlisted NCO were therefore not inconsiderable.

Physically past his prime and not certain to be up to speed with the recent changes in drill, the

¹ N. D. Cliff, *To Hell and Back with the Guards*, Chippenham, 1988, p. 14. In his semi-fictionalised *Death of a Hero*, Richard Aldington wrote that the old-school NCOs 'particularly hated any educated or well-bred man in the ranks, and delighted to impose painful or humiliating tasks on him'. R. Aldington, *Death of a Hero*, London, 1984 edn., p. 239.

² Graham, *Private in the Guards*, pp. 27, 28, 61.

³ A. J. Abraham, memoir, P191, IWM, p. 19; Wilson, memoir, 86/30/1, IWM, pp. 15,20; Bartlett, memoir, p. 56; George Ashurst, *My Bit: A Lancashire Fusilier at War 1914-18*, Ramsbury, 1987, p. 31.

man brought out of retirement was nevertheless expected to tactfully mould from civilian into soldier a less diffident volunteer than he was used to, all against a backdrop of organisational chaos. Such difficulties should not be overstated, however. The army's insistence on a more tactful approach to discipline did not come as a great culture shock to the re-enlisted men. Guards battalions apart, Britain's peacetime army had, as shown, long since sought a more even balance between stick and carrot in an attempt to attract a better type of recruit. Not all NCOs had succeeded in balancing the two, but to view the dug-outs as insufficiently reconstructed to deal with the new type of recruit is a misapprehension. If the army's directives had failed to penetrate the skulls of some of the more stubborn old-soldier types, especially those stationed at regimental depots, many more had absorbed the new ethos. The most effective peacetime NCOs had, what is more, risen to the top of their rank by virtue of their man management skills. Few had ever relied solely on their institutionally backed powers to enforce discipline. Instead they had employed a combination of wit, guile and knowledge of human nature acquired over many years service to get the best from their men; strategies and experience which stood them in good stead with the new breed of volunteer.¹

Above all, the re-enlisted men shared the spirit of the volunteers. They were back in the army out of choice not compulsion and delighted to be there and of some use. They recognised that the new recruits had a lot to learn but admired their enthusiasm and made light of their military inadequacies, transmitting instructions with sympathy and patience. One observer was struck by the quiet fortitude of his 'indefatigable N.C.O. upon whom the brunt of the work has fallen' and how remarkable it was 'not that he loses his temper, but that he should be able to preserve it' given the constant correcting of the same mistakes.² Gestures of goodwill by the re-enlisted men did not go unnoticed by the volunteers. On parade Middlebrook found his NCOs 'gruff and savage', but conceded that off it they were 'decent

¹ B. Williams, *Raising and Training the New Armies*, London, 1918, p. 118; R. S. Patston, memoir, 78/4/1, IWM, p. 18; "The Stand Easy". *Journal of the 2/7 Manchester Regiment*, No. 1, August 1916, p. 24.

² P. Macgill, *The Amateur Army*, London 1915, p. 54.

and somewhat kind'.¹ Respect turned to genuine affection in some cases. The company sergeant major of B Company of the 17th Service (Glasgow Chamber of Commerce) Battalion Highland Light Infantry was referred to fondly as "Pa", while the benevolence of his old NCOs during basic training was a memory F. Hodges of the 10th Lancashire Fusiliers carried with him well into his dotage.²

The worth to the army of the re-enlisted men during this period of emergency was considerable. Regimental Sergeant-major Harry Cave of the 15th Highland Light Infantry was typical of the best of the veterans. Too old to go overseas, Cave nevertheless played an invaluable role in assisting rankers and officers alike, breaking in and hardening the new recruits and imparting a wealth of knowledge of his unit's command structure and internal economy to his battalion's newly appointed NCOs and junior officers. Wrote his unit's historian:

'He knew everything of soldiering in precise detail from the orderly room to the cookhouse. For his assistance in arranging the company formations, selecting the non commissioned ranks and drawing up the details of drilling and training, the commanding officer and the adjutant were deeply indebted. His enthusiasm was no less than his skill. None of those young officers and soldiers who spanked along the roads of Ayrshire with him on those bright early mornings...or heard that high-pitched, long-carrying voice which rang for half a mile over the golf courses and beaches, will ever forget Cave, kindly efficient Cave, one of the type of men who made Kitchener's Army a living reality.'³

The mere presence of the re-enlisted men was often enough to motivate the new recruit. Even if age had slowed him and retirement widened his girth, the brilliantined, lantern-jawed sergeant who confronted the volunteers for the first time still cut a formidable figure. To impressionable recruits he was at once terrifying and inspirational. Strutting across the drill-square barking his commands, the no-nonsense senior NCO represented an intimidating but effective introduction to army discipline, one that had to be and was quickly accepted. He commanded great authority as much from the mystique that surrounded his rank as the possession of the kind of look that could shrivel a man's marrow on parade.

¹ Middlebrook, letter, 26.11.15.

² "*The Outpost*", No. 2, March 1915, p. 32; R. Van Emden and S. Humphries, *Veterans*, Barnsley, 1998, p. 24.

³ Quoted in Simkins, *Kitchener's Army*, p. 223.

Resplendent in battle ribbons, he was also a living reminder of the Regiment's past glories, achievements that the men before him were eager to match. P. G. Heath's platoon sergeant, a VC decorated Reservist, was held in awe by his men. Interestingly, when the company departed for France he was left behind because of incompetence.¹ Despite his shortcomings, he had served as a valuable figurehead to his unit.

As enlistment in the New Armies gathered pace, the army widened its search for NCOs. The supply of reservists and dug-outs was finite and though wounded veterans, insufficiently fit for a return to front-line service, would shortly become available, there remained a shortfall in the number of men capable of giving instruction to the volunteer battalions.² Able bodied teachers, encouraged by the Board of Education's promise to keep open their jobs and make up the difference in pay, were taken on to instruct military drill and physical exercise.³ Most in demand were police officers, especially those with service experience, and police-sergeants were promised immediate promotion to the equivalent army rank.⁴ Some units, like the 16th Northumberland Fusiliers, were helped by the loan of senior NCOs from the Officer Training Corps of their local grammar school.⁵ In the few areas where supply outstripped demand, recruiting officers were ordered not to turn away suitable candidates but instead direct them to an alternative depot, a decision which doubtless dissuaded some volunteers.⁶

Whereas the rank of senior NCO was filled mainly by reservists and men brought out of retirement, it was the volunteers themselves who were appointed to the junior non-commissioned ranks (reservists were approached first but, as will be shown, often proved reluctant to take a stripe). Selection had to be made quickly and frequently *en masse*. In less than two months during the spring of 1915 the 11th East Yorkshires appointed 27 lance

¹ Heath, memoir, p. 29.

² Bartlett, memoir, p. 36, 54.

³ Circular from Board of Education to Local Education Authorities, 19.10.14, WO 162/3, PRO.

⁴ Adjutant-General to GOCs-in-C of Commands, 5.10.14, WO 162/3, PRO.

⁵ Cpt. C.H. Cooke, *Historical Records of the 16th Battalion Northumberland Fusiliers*, Newcastle, 1923, p. 5.

⁶ Adjutant-General to GOCs-in-C of Commands, 26.10.14, WO 162/3, PRO.

corporals and promoted 11 men to the rank of corporal.¹ The selection criteria were predictably straightforward in most units. In Territorial formations with a predominantly working class bias, preference was given to those middle-class volunteers who had failed to be snapped up for a commission. But in others it proved far more idiosyncratic and sometimes surprisingly democratic. The commanding officer of Charles Callender singled out candidates for promotion by chatting informally with the men while H. Bartlett's sergeant chose to take his company on a run instead of a march, earmarking the most enthusiastic recruits for promotion. A. J. Abraham recollected that his sergeant major's only 'exam' for the rank of lance corporal was to line up the men and ask them to bellow a word of command, the most stentorian candidates being duly appointed. One recruit claimed that his physique had singled him out as NCO material, though not in a positive sense; six inches taller than any other man in his section, he suspected that his height spoiled the symmetry of his section on parade.² Some battalions actually encouraged the men themselves to elect their own section leaders, whilst smartness of dress determined the choice of lance corporal in others.³

As a rule the authorities favoured those 'ready made' volunteers who had occupied a position of some authority in civilian life and were therefore deemed in possession of the necessary leadership qualities.⁴ Factory foremen were singled out for a stripe while former Boy Scouts or members of the Boy's Brigade, all well practised in receiving and issuing orders, and teachers, accomplished in the ways of 'drill', were obvious choices.⁵ Such apparent credentials might not always be readily transferable from a civilian to military setting, however. H. Bartlett's company was populated with 'Ex Scouts, Ex Soldiers, Ex Territorials or Ex Boys Brigade lads', yet he recalled that almost all of those who took the

¹ "The Snapper", Vol. X, May 1915, pp. 97-8.

² Leasor, *Sergeant Major*, p. 55.

³ Middlebrook, letters, 27.11.15, 12.2.16; Abraham, memoir, p. 19; Callender, memoir, p. 15, IWM; Bartlett, memoir, p. 21; H. Green, 'Kitchener's Army', *Army Quarterly*, Vol. LXXXXII, 1966, p. 88; Milner, *Leeds Pals*, p. 35; P. Simkins, 'The War Experience of a Typical Kitchener Division: The 18th Division, 1914-18', in H. Cecil and P. H. Liddle (eds.), *Facing Armageddon: the First World War Experienced*, London, 1996, p. 299; Lt. Col. T. M. Banks and Cpt. R. A. Chell, *With the IO¹' Essex in France*, London, 1921, p. 16.

⁴ R. S. S. Baden Powell, 'Training for Territorials', *Journal of the Royal United Services Institution*, Vol. LII, 1908, p. 1480.

⁵ D. Woodall, *The Mobbs' Own: The 7th Battalion The Northants Regiment 1914-1918*, Spratton, 1994, p. 39.

stripe returned to the ranks, leaving a unit of NCOs largely devoid of any military inclination.¹ The selection process might also raise issues of status. The authorities believed that a direct reproduction of the civilian social hierarchy would best enable the new military unit to function smoothly, the logic being that men who had been foremen in the workplace would now be made sergeants while production line workers would continue to occupy their place in the ranks.² This was an ideal not always achieved, however, and it was not uncommon for the civilian hierarchy to be turned on its head. Troops found themselves placed in the awkward position of having to give orders to their social 'betters' or to a former superior from their own workplace, whilst youngsters were given responsibility for the discipline of men twice their age.³

The high demand for NCOs offered the prospect of rapid promotion for the volunteer who showed keenness and a predisposition towards the rank. Even senior NCO posts were soon opened up to men who only weeks earlier had been in civilian clothes. The shortage of senior NCOs became especially acute in the 2nd and 3rd New Armies. In less than two months the 11th East Yorkshires made sergeants of twelve privates, bypassing the rank of corporal - a move that would have been unheard of in pre-war days.⁴ Promotion in Territorial units was often as swift with men who made an immediate pledge to serve abroad (Territorials were under no obligation to serve overseas) filling the shoes of reluctant NCOs. Made lance corporal in the first week of the war, R. W. F. Johnston found himself a full sergeant by September.⁵

The rank of junior NCO brought with it the same challenges as it had always done, but they were challenges magnified by the exigencies of war. Unlike his pre-war counterpart who had usually served a minimum two-year long apprenticeship as a private, the Kitchener volunteer singled out for promotion had to learn simultaneously to become both a soldier and a NCO. The new NCO had the twin tasks of explaining and issuing orders while at the same

¹ Bartlett, memoir, p. 22.

² R. Kipling, *The New Armies in Training*, London, 1915, p. 59.

³ Carter, *Birmingham Pals*, pp. 56-7; Stedman, *Manchester Pals*, p. 34.

⁴ "*The Snapper*", Vol. X, March 1915, p. 58.

⁵ R. W. F. Johnston, memoir, 82/38/1, IWM, p. 1.

time digesting the myriad army regulations and instructions that underpinned those orders. He had also to acquire the more advanced technical skills associated with leading a section in field training, such as fire direction and the value of ground. He had, moreover, to do it quickly - the average training time for battalions of the New Armies was only 9.4 months.¹ The need to cram years of soldiering into a few months obliged men to work doubly hard. New NCOs drilled early in the morning ahead of the rest of their unit, acquiring the rudiments of drill so that they themselves might soon impart it, and studied in their own time after hours.² Formal educational requirements for the rank of NCO were suspended for the duration of the war but new NCOs were still expected to be able to read and write to a reasonable standard.³ All NCOs received a steady supply of books on military affairs and attended NCO classes several evenings a week, but those who had enlisted in arms with a particular technical bias, such as the Royal Engineers or cavalry, faced an especially steep learning curve. One newly appointed sergeant-scout recalled having to absorb the contents of some twelve military manuals on 'Infantry Training, Cavalry Training, Musketry, Signalling, Field Engineering, Judging Distance, Map Reading, sketching and trigonometry, estimating heights and gradients.'⁴ On top of their regular training, new NCOs were, just as in peacetime, sent on intensive specialist training courses in signalling, pioneering and physical instruction.⁵

Digesting the basic technical aspects of the rank was the least exacting challenge facing the new NCO. The finer points of military law, the customs and command structure of his new unit and, above all, the subtleties of his rank as regards observing the correct relationship with the men under his command, all had to be assimilated. *King's Regulations*, however, offered only partial direction through the minefield that was military protocol. Nor could the novice NCO rely, as his peacetime counterpart had done, on the guidance of a superior. Where the pre-war lance corporal had spent a long period of his apprenticeship

¹ F. W. Perry, *The Commonwealth armies: manpower and organisation in two world wars*, London, 1988, p. 36.

² D. Bilton, *Hull Pals*, p. 31; Middlebrook, letter, 21.1.16.

³ Wilson, memoir, pp. 2, 5.

⁴ Stedman, *Manchester Pals*, p. 34.

⁵ Milner, *Leeds Pals*, p. 46; Perriman, memoir, p. 3; Abraham, memoir, p. 27.

shadowing an experienced senior NCO, the relative scarcity of regular senior NCOs in the volunteer battalions left the few who were available with barely enough time to impart the rudiments of drill and physical training to the new men, let alone offer individual tutelage. Denied the tuition and time to absorb every aspect of his new rank, the freshman NCO was forced to rely on a combination of strength of character and bluff to navigate his way through the nuances and pitfalls of his new rank. F. H. Keeling, a Fabian socialist and graduate of Cambridge whose early death on the Somme cut short a potentially brilliant career as an economist, was as far removed from the archetypal regular NCO as could be imagined. Like many volunteers, however, Keeling was bright, quick and eager to learn and, most important, fully aware of one of the main ingredients of effective leadership. He confessed that ‘It’s acting, of course, but I come to feel more and more that all leadership is in a way acting, conscious or unconscious’.¹

Edgar Mobbs was another whose lack of military know-how failed to hinder his progress up the ranks. A pre-war rugby player of international fame before the war, Mobbs succeeded in raising a company of 250 men from amongst friends and fans in only two days.² Mobbs’ sporting pre-eminence singled him out from the ranks of the 7th Northants and he was made a warrant officer almost immediately. That he faced a steep learning curve is illustrated by his initial tendency to dismiss his men from the drill-square with a polite “Off you go, chaps”. On one occasion Mobbs was ordered to form a fatigue and, though his response was enthusiastic, he confessed to having not the slightest idea as to what one was.³ Volunteers like Mobbs, however, proved that the long and arduous NCO apprenticeship of the pre-war days was, though desirable, not a prerequisite for command, and that for the new NCO’s authority to be meaningful it was necessary only for him to know more than his men. Besides, Mobbs’

¹ E. Townshend (ed.), *Keeling Letters and Recollections*, London, 1918, p. 199.

² B. Bushaway, ‘Name Upon Name: The Great War And Remembrance’, in R. Porter (ed.), *Myths of the English*, Cambridge, 1992, p. 139.

³ Woodall, *Mobbs’ Own*, pp. 40, 56. The experience of H. N. Edwards, a newly appointed NCO with the 6th Gloucesters, serves as a further example of the military ignorance of the majority of volunteers. Issued with a clinometer by his officer and told to “Carry on sergeant”, Edwards replied, “I’m very sorry, sir, I don’t think I can do this. I’m a greengrocer in civil life”. Quoted in L. Macdonald, *1915: The Death of Innocence*, London, 1993, p. 159.

sheer bravado went a long way towards making up for his military deficiencies while his reputation earned on the rugby field undoubtedly blinded his men to his initial technical shortcomings. Even Mobbs, though, had his limitations. Having accepted the rank of sergeant major he soon realised that he had bitten off more than he could chew and shortly after requested a reduction to the rank of sergeant.¹

Mobbs and Keeling possessed exceptional abilities, but even men not obviously cut out for military life discovered a talent for leadership which, but for the arrival of war, would probably have remained undiscovered. Recruits who had led anonymous, humdrum civilian lives now found themselves in positions of considerable authority. Guy Chapman recalled one such NCO who at first glance had struck him as ill-equipped for the rank of NCO, a man reminiscent of a 'small innocuous company clerk' who could, confessed Chapman, 'nevertheless handle men, and somehow conveyed a sense of fierce authority'.² Another admitted that his initial misgivings over the quality of a comrade had been ill-founded: 'We were staggered when we found he had been made a lance-corporal...(yet) In a month we liked him, in six months we said he was as good as any other NCO in the battalion, in twelve months time we were glad to help him carry out any difficult command he had to obey, in eighteen months we would have cleaned his boots.'³ Keeness and intelligence alone could not transform civilians into soldiers, but the military ignorance of the Kitchener and Territorial volunteers was partly compensated for by the secular skills they brought with them from civilian life. The volunteer NCO may not have possessed the snap and smartness of the regular, but he was not inexperienced in life or ignorant of the nature of discipline.

Not all units possessed volunteer NCOs of such high calibre and much of the first few months of training the army devoted to trying out new NCOs, discarding the unsuitable and replacing them with candidates slow to come forward. The authorities were desperate to keep

¹ Woodall, *Mobb 's Own*, p. 41. Mulling over the prospects of promotion for himself and the other volunteers of his unit, a candidate for a commission with the 2nd Suffolks acknowledged that though they might make the rank of captain or even major, 'we should not - we *could not* - become a real RSM'. Quoted in Macdonald, *1915*, p. 164.

² Chapman, *Passionate Prodigality*, London, p. 131.

³ H. V. Drinkwater, unpublished account, DS/MISC/54, IWM, p. 42.

men who showed potential and sought to ensure that no unnecessary obstacles were placed in the path of the NCO probationer. They recognised the steep learning curve that confronted the new NCO and the temptation to throw in the towel if chided too severely. Officers and senior NCOs were subsequently urged to nurture the new appointees, ensuring that they were not reduced at the slightest infraction.¹ One suspects, however, that as many men chose to relinquish their stripes as had them taken away, the additional responsibilities and workload associated with the rank of NCO proving too much for some. Reservists, knowing the game too well, rejected the prospect of advancement outright, but so too did men new to the service, who quickly equated the rank of lance corporal with drudgery.²

It was less the workload than the subtleties of the new rank that many men had difficulty in adjusting to. New lance corporals, overbearing in their eagerness to prove themselves and stamp their authority, offended their men with their tactlessness and earned the mistrust of their officers with hastily brought charges.³ Others found difficult the shift from receiving to giving orders, especially youngsters who were daunted by the prospect of instructing older men. Ralph Smith, of the 12th Gloucesters, 'hated the thought of being in charge of men, much, much older than myself, while another aspiring NCO, A. J. Abraham, felt comfortable about putting in for a stripe only after most of the older men in his battalion had been drafted to France. He confessed that 'now that we knew that we youngsters made up more than ninety percent of the battalion the picture looked very different and we all agreed to have a go'.⁴ The likelihood of ordering reservists, men who knew the law inside out and just how far they could bend it, dissuaded others. Though the novice NCO need only be one chapter of *King's Regulations* ahead of his fellow volunteers, his technical inadequacies were impossible to conceal from seasoned reservists, some of whom doubtless intimidated the new men.

¹ Adjutant-General to GOCs-in-C of Commands, 16.10.14, WO 162/3, PRO.

² Priestley, *Margin Released*, p. 88; G. V. Dennis, memoir, 78/58/1, IWM, p. 23.

³ Callender, memoir, pp. 2, 7; W. D. Shanahan, memoir, 97/16/1, IWM, p. 3.

⁴ R. I. Smith, memoir, 86/36/1, IWM, p. 2; Abraham, memoir, p. 19.

As in pre-war days, the greatest difficulty for many new NCOs lay in having to give orders to former friends and associates. Several memoirs testify to the struggle had by NCOs in adjusting to the new relationship with former friends, their polite requests to new subordinates meeting with less than prompt obedience.¹ One veteran summed up neatly the dilemma facing the new NCOs. 'I was to be addressed as "Corporal" in future,' wrote one new appointee, 'and not by my name or nickname. This sort of thing is awkward with old friends.. .if you are in authority and people get too familiar, they will argue when told to do something they don't like, and arguing is barred with a war on.'² Upon promotion J. B. Priestley found himself immediately treated with suspicion by his former rankers. 'I was no longer a man and a brother,' he wrote.³ Such emotional hurdles led some men to forfeit their stripe and dissuade many more from accepting one, but the difficulty of ordering former friends should not be overstated. More often than not the transition from ranker to NCO proved little more than a temporary inconvenience and both sides soon accepted the parameters of the new arrangement. Indeed, in many Kitchener and Territorial units, friendships forged in civil life acted as a lubricant rather than a source of friction. As the epithet implies, the 'Pals' battalions had as their origin friendship. They included NCOs and men who hailed from the same streets, had attended the same schools, were members of the same sports clubs and drank in the same bars. Such affiliations were unlikely to be entirely severed by promotion; instead they were harnessed. Discipline in many New Army and Territorial units was based on mutual goodwill and co-operation rather than the strict separation of the ranks deemed necessary by the regular mind.⁴

Certainly, some sources contrast the relative difficulty of forging close relations with superiors at home with the trench environment, where, as we shall see, some units refused or found it difficult to erect artificial barriers between officers and NCOs and their men. A pre-war Territorial remained slightly bemused that his captain, a senior in the same college as he

¹ "Ganpat", 'Fallen Angels', *Blackwood's Magazine*, No. MCCXII, Vol. 200, 1916, p. 508.

² D. H. Bell, *A Soldiers Diary of the Great War*, London, n.d., p. 44.

³ Priestley, *Margin Released*, p. 96.

⁴ Heath, memoir, p. 7.

some years earlier, though kind to him during his period of basic training, 'never had a meal with him' and 'only once did I have a stroll'. Only with the shift to active service did he note a change in attitude. 'The spirit of the army out here is quite different from what it is in England,' he observed. The men are fine and the officers are their comrades.¹ Yet a number of memoirs testify to the close relations between the ranks during training. On parade, relations between NCOs and men in some units were so friendly that 'Christian names were used'.² Off parade it was not uncommon for privates of Territorial battalions to be seen in the same restaurants as officers, thanks to their similar affluent backgrounds.³ Over time, promotion led to a natural sloughing of former ties as the new NCO settled down to his new duties and began friendships with new colleagues. But that did not signal an end to close relations between the ranks. Relations formed in civilian life and continued during training forged a bond which would help sustain men through the struggle that was to come.

¹ B. D. Parkin, notebook, 86/57/1, IWM; see also J. Woollin papers, PP/MCR/110, IWM.

² Dennis, memoir, p. 11.

³ B. Latham, *A Territorial Soldier's War*, Aidershot, 1967, p. 7.

Chapter 3: The NCO and discipline on the Western Front

3.1 The nature of the Western Front

The picture of the war painted by the 'War poets' and a number of less popularly known essayists¹ is a bleak one: men cowered under an interminable barrage of enemy shells, their trench-bound existence punctuated only by futile attacks that met with certain injury and likely death. This formative image of the conflict has intensified, not diminished, with the passing of time. Defined by one post-war generation it was confirmed by another. Leon Wolff's *In Flanders Fields*, published in Britain in 1959, introduced the misery and horror of the Western Front to a new audience, whilst Alan Clark's *The Donkeys* (1961) cemented in the popular consciousness the war's utter futility; the flower of Britain's youth sacrificed by an incompetent and callous officer class. The BBC's series *The Great War* (first shown in the summer of 1964) did little to alter the public's perception of the conflict; its balanced analysis clouded by the emotive nature of much of the film's footage. Recent populist drama, both serious (*The Monocled Mutineer*) and comic (*Blackadder*), has served to underscore the first impressions of Sassoon and Owen.

Compelling though it may appear, this is an incomplete picture of life on the Western Front. To be sure, the threat of death and mutilation as well as the sheer physical and emotional exhaustion of battle took an immense toll on men. The day his battalion was withdrawn from combat on the Somme a medical officer wrote: 'All around me are the faces of men who do not seem to have slept for a week. Some who were tired before look ill; the very gait of the men has lost its spring. The sap has gone out of them. They are dried up.'² Even when not engaged in combat, men were never completely safe in the front-line. In an active stretch of the line, troops were vulnerable to indiscriminate mortar fire whilst in all sectors there existed the permanent threat of a sniper's bullet. Robert Graves maintained that the 'quiet times' along his unit's stretch of front were some of the tensest and often the most

¹ Of whom arguably the most famous and influential was C. E. Montague, author of *Disenchantment*, London, 1922.

² Lord Moran, *The Anatomy of Courage*, London, 1984 edn., p. 53.

deadly.¹ Everyday life in the trenches could be brutally harsh. Appalling weather, filth, disease and inadequate rations conspired at times to make conditions at the front intolerable. Backbreaking labour added to the strain. Indeed, not withstanding combat, of all the hardships to be endured on the Western Front the greatest was work.

The source of much of the infantryman's labour was the trench itself. Shifting soil, rainfall and enemy shelling engaged the British soldier in an almost Sisyphean struggle to maintain a habitable environment. In addition to routine trench duties there were always numerous other tasks to perform. John Handley, a subaltern with the 6th Battalion of the King's Liverpool Regiment, recalled a not untypical stint in the front-line assisting mining engineers who were busy running a tunnel to the enemy held Hill 60 on the Ypres Salient: 'Two hours on sentry watch; two hours pumping air into the shaft.' The rest of the time was spent 'filling sandbags with mined earth and carrying them away'.² Another veteran confessed to the impossibility of performing sentry duty after a day of unbroken labour: 'Some chaps,' he wrote, 'have had to take off their wraps and balaclavas so as to let the cold keep them awake.'³ On top of regular fatigues was the seemingly endless list of miscellaneous, but always onerous, jobs that were forever cropping up. One soldier recalled drawing what was surely the shortest of straws in having to bury 'cows, horses and pigs that have been dead for months'.⁴

The British soldier's existence in the front-line was therefore rarely less than hazardous and often grim, but it would be wrong for a number of reasons to view the trench-experience as one of universal, undiluted misery. A multiplicity of factors ensured that few sections (the width of a British Divisional battlefront sector was between 2,750 and 3500 yards, with each sector divided into sections, roughly 300 yards wide and manned by a company) of the front-line were ever identical in nature. Differences of topography, weather and the calibre of opposition precluded any commonality of experience. The Ypres Salient, a

¹ R. Graves, *Goodbye To All That*, London, 1982 edn., p. 101.

² J. S. Handley, unpublished account, 92/36/1, IWM, p. 26.

³ C. P. Quayle, letter, 13.12.14, 92/19/1, IWM.

⁴ S. Norton, quoted in Staffordshire County Council Education Dept., *In Flanders Fields*, 1979, p. 21.

knuckle of British defiance projecting some four miles into the German line, was by far the worst place to be. The Salient was vulnerable to attack from three sides, the enemy's concentrated and accurate artillery fire guaranteeing the British forces a frightful existence. Situated in the low lying Flanders plain - a complex network of ditches, canals and small streams and protected from the sea only by sand dunes - the area was equally helpless to the elements. Heavy rain frequently raised the water table, turning the landscape into a sea of mud that reduced the network of structured trenches to no more than a series of ditches and shell holes.¹ Other sectors, however, escaped relatively unscathed, at least early on. Until the middle of 1916 the stretch of line along the Somme was one of more or less undamaged, serene countryside, its trenches drier and quieter than those in the extreme north. One observer compared the trenches at Bullay Grenay to a health resort, so devoid of activity were they.²

Ypres was seen as central to the success of both sides and as a result was a permanently 'active' sector. There were many less pivotal points of the line, however, and troops spent at least as many days in 'quiet' as 'active' sectors. Along certain lines of front the 'offensive spirit' was effectively put on hold, both sides operating an informal system of 'live and let live'.³ Stormont Gibbs claimed that 'It was not customary to "pot" at an enemy should he show his head as this tended to attract reprisals and disturb the peace'.⁴ Boredom, rather than fear, was the main source of anxiety for troops stationed along a so called 'Egg and chips' front. One officer recalled that after sleeping and eating his only activity in the front-line was writing letters.⁵ The effectiveness of what amounted to an armed truce was contingent on the social composition of the opposition. Prussian units earned a reputation for fanaticism and pursued the war with enthusiasm, but regiments with a Saxon bias proved less

¹ Many of the defences in Flanders were, in fact, breastworks (above ground) rather than trenches.

² Rixon, diary, 19.6.16.

³ Tony Ashworth has shown that there existed a common interest between officers and other ranks in circumventing where possible some of the more tactless orders sent from above. A. E. Ashworth, 'The Sociology of Trench Warfare', *British Journal of Sociology*, 4, December 1968, p. 420.

⁴ R. Devonald-Lewis (ed.), *From the Somme to the Armistice: The Memoirs of Captain Stormont Gibbs, MC*, London, 1986, p. 43.

⁵ C. E. L. Lyne, letter, 16.10.15, 80/14/1, IWM.

zealous. A. J. Rixon, a NCO with the 1/18 London Regiment at Festubert, confided in his diary that the Saxons opposite 'won't fire if we don't'. Relations between Rixon's unit and the enemy opposite were sufficiently cordial for an enquiry to be made from the German trenches as to the result of that month's F.A. Cup final. Rixon's diary records that his answer was met with despair from the inquirer, a waiter in London before the war and an ardent Chelsea fan.¹ Frequently it was simply geographical space, or the lack of it, that dictated the level of activity. In some areas the furthest trench lines of the two sides were almost contiguous, advanced listening parties separated by little more than ten yards.² With the two sides so close together, shelling could not be risked. As a result, certain points of the front line proved, paradoxically, safer than the reserve line.³

Whether a man found himself in an active or a quiet stretch of the line tended to be something of a lottery. The 6th Battalion of the Royal Berkshires arrived in France in July 1915 and was sent to a relatively 'cushy' sector on the Somme. In contrast, the 8th Battalion, which arrived on the Continent a month later, had an altogether different introduction to the war. Allocated to a regular division, it had the misfortune to be thrown into action almost immediately at Loos in September.⁴ Nevertheless, men were seldom unlucky enough to find themselves in the front-line for a sustained period of time. Charles Carrington, who served with the 1/5* Royal Warwickshires, recorded that in 1916 he spent a total of only three months in or close to the front-line: 120 days in reserve, 73 days at rest behind the lines, 72 days variously on leave, sick, travelling and attending courses, 36 days in close support behind the front-line, and under 65 days in the front line itself.⁵ Certainly, some elite units were more frequently employed in active sectors and in active operations than others.⁶ For the majority of troops, however, the duration of a tour of duty remained a fairly constant state of

¹ Rixon, diary, 29.4.15. Another veteran claimed that the Saxons went so far as to call for a verbal agreement on no action. B. Adams, *Nothing of Importance*, Stevenage, 1988, p. 31.

² Vemey, *Micks*, p. 34.

³ E. May, *Signal Corporal. The Story Of The 2nd Battalion London Irish Rifles In The First World War*, London, 1972, p. 28.

⁴ C. Fox et al, *On the Somme. The Kitchener Battalions of the Royal Berkshire Regiment 1916*, University of Reading, 1996, p. 11.

⁵ C. Edmonds, *Subaltern's War*, London, 1929, p. 120.

⁶ 5* Army war diary, 8.10.15, WO 95/524, PRO.

affairs until the final Allied push of 1918 increased the proportion of trench time to more than a half. The schedule of the infantryman's tour was based on rotation, both within the line itself and between different sections of it, the aim being to spread the onus of duties and vary the degree of exposure to the enemy. A battalion spent three to four weeks alternating between front, support and reserve lines. The tour of duty of the Somme by the 14th Royal Warwickshires in the spring of 1916 was typical: support line 15-20 March; front line 21-27; reserve line 28 March to 3 April; support lines 4-11 April; front-line 12-19; 20-27 Divisional rest and general training.¹ A week was the usual period of stay in each line though an enemy attack might require men to remain in the front-line for longer than normal. In a letter home H. P. Branton complained of going unchanged for nine weeks, the result of his extended stay at the front. But hardships tend to be bemoaned only when they are not taken for granted; that Branton chose to draw attention to his experience perhaps indicates how unusual it was.² Indeed, especially harsh conditions might actually lead to the shortening of a unit's tour of the front line.³

If the time spent by the British soldier in the front-line was limited, then so too was his experience of combat. Major offensives on the Western Front were infrequent. In 1915, for example, the British launched a short-lived offensive at Neuve Chappelle (10-15 March); defended against a German attack at Ypres between April and May; saw action at Aubers Ridge and Festubert (both in May 1915), and advanced against the German Sixth Army at Loos (25 September-14 October) - in total little more than a month of action between the end of 1914 and the beginning of the Somme offensive. Though the General Staff adopted an active-front policy for the intervening periods, men were never continually engaged in combat. Of course, combat when it did take place meant the very real prospect of being injured: close to 1.75 million men are estimated to have been maimed both physically and mentally.⁴ But even in the bloodiest offensives the odds were against one being killed.

¹ Carter, *Birmingham Pals*, p. 132.

² H. P. Branton, letter, 2.11.17, con shelf, IWM; see also B. F. Eccles, letter, 25.5.17, 82/22/1, IWM.

³ Cooke, *Northumberland Fusiliers*, p. 65.

⁴ *Statistics of Military Effort*, p. 24.

Statistically, a man's chances of becoming a casualty were significantly increased by serving in the infantry on the Western Front. But the 'three weeks' subaltern', so emblematic of the 'slaughter' of the war, is a myth.¹ There was no 'permanent' killing situation. In response to Paul Fussell's claim that even in quiet periods the British army suffered 7000 killed and wounded everyday, Robin Prior and Trevor Wilson have pointed out that this would have amounted to some ten million casualties! The three and a half-month Somme offensive, one of the most intensive of the war, saw the British army sustain only 3000 casualties a day.² Moreover, of the 5,704,416 men who passed through the ranks between August 1914 and November 1918, only 722,785 are estimated to have been killed.³ Such heavy losses are proof enough of the destructiveness of the war, but alarmingly high though they may be, it is doubtful that they constitute a 'lost generation' of men.⁴

3.2 Front line discipline

The citizen soldier who arrived in France was viewed by many in the British High Command as insufficiently trained and drilled to cope with the demands of industrialised warfare. Staff concerns over training also betrayed a more deep-rooted fear held by those in authority about the moral fibre of the citizen recruit. By his very act of volunteering, the Kitchener recruit had given his consent to the legitimacy of the army's code. He had, moreover, demonstrated his spirit and enthusiasm during training. The spirit shown in training was nevertheless insufficient to dispel the fears of a General Staff who doubted both the citizen soldier's ability and temperament to cope with conditions that it knew were likely to test even seasoned regulars. The volunteer battalions contained more than a smattering of intelligent and educated recruits, of far better calibre than the army's traditional pre-war

¹ Martin Middlebrook has calculated that a subaltern spent an average of over six months at the front and only one in five was actually killed. M. Middlebrook, *The Kaiser's Battle*, London, 1978, pp. 405-7.

² R. Prior and T. Wilson, 'Paul Fussell at War', *War in History*, 1, 1, 1994, p. 67. In its defence, Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory*, London, 1975, is best approached as a piece of literary criticism rather than a historical text.

³ Beckett, 'The nation in arms', pp. 26-7.

⁴ Jay Winter has argued that the concept of a 'lost generation' could, however, be justifiably applied to the middle and upper-classes, who compared to the working-classes suffered disproportionately heavy losses. Winter, 'Britain's Lost Generation', pp. 449-66.

intake. But, as we have seen, the authorities viewed the changing social composition of the army less as a blessing than a curse. They feared an influx of sub-standard specimens, weakened both physically and morally by urban living. For a militarily unprepared and morally dubious force not to degenerate into a rabble on active service, strict discipline was therefore deemed essential. Consequently, officers and NCOs were ordered to be vigilant in their enforcement of discipline.¹

On paper, therefore, the army appeared firm in its commitment to the continuation of a pre-war regular style code of discipline for the New Army and Territorial battalions. Whether it achieved its aim in practice, however, is questionable. Certainly, bare statistical evidence would appear to bear out A. J. P. Taylor's claim that the British army was the army of 'the most severe punishments'.² At the start of the war there was 1 military policeman for every 3,306 British soldiers, compared with a ratio of 1 to 291 at the end. Moreover, between 4 August 1914 and 31 March 1920 a total of 304,262 British officers (5,952) and men (289,310) were court-martialled. Also, the British army in four years of war executed 346 of its men, a much high number than the German total of 48.³ The bare figures are misleading, however. The increase in the number of military police is proof of the vigilance of an army determined to ensure the strict observance of its military code. But the number of capital punishments of British soldiers appears lenient when set alongside the figures for the Italian and French armies, who carried out 750 and 700 executions respectively. What is more, for every British soldier executed another nine had their capital convictions commuted: 3,080 death sentences were awarded by British military courts but of those found guilty less than 11% were executed.⁴ The authorities made no blanket application of military law. Each individual case was treated on its merits and punishment was made to fit the criminal and not the crime. Only as a last resort was the death sentence awarded. Men found guilty of a capital

¹ W. Childs, *Episodes and Reflections*, London, 1930, p. 144.

² A. J. P. Taylor, *The First World War: An Illustrated History*, London, 1963, p. 101.

³ D. Englander and J. Osborne, 'Jack, Tommy, and Henry Dubb: the Armed Forces and the Working Class', *Historical Journal*, 21,3, 1978, p. 595; *Statistics of Military Effort*, p. 643.

⁴ D. Englander, 'Mutinies and Military Morale', in H. Strachan (ed.), *The Oxford Illustrated History of the First World War*, Oxford, 1998, p. 192.

offence were invariably given a second chance and almost a half of those executed had been in serious trouble before.' The circumstances leading up to the execution of C. F. McColl, a ranker with the 1/4th East Yorkshires, were not untypical. A recidivist with a number of minor offences to his name, McColl had twice been found guilty of desertion, his sentence on each occasion commuted, before being executed for a third act of desertion.²

Interestingly, this author has found little evidence to suggest that the troops themselves considered the death penalty outrageous. Men tended to feel little sympathy for deserters, who accounted for the vast majority of those executed and who were branded as cowards for letting the side down and jeopardising the safety of their unit. In a passage from Frederic Manning's semi-autobiographical account of the war, *The Middle Parts of Fortune*, Private Bourne, the novel's anti-hero, inquires of the fate of a recaptured deserter: ' "What will you do if he tries to do a bunk again?" he asks a corporal. "Shoot the bugger," said Marshall, whitening to the lips. "By God, if he tries that game on me I won't give him a dog's chance." ' A fictional creation, Manning's corporal nevertheless echoed the sentiments of many of the rank and file.³

If the death penalty was used sparingly, routine discipline was nevertheless vigorously enforced; order and efficiency depended upon it. The army, as it had always done, insisted on prompt obedience and a strict adherence to procedure. Any man whose deliberate action posed a threat to military efficiency was likely to be punished. Yet if the authorities were not slow to bring offenders to book - the British army presided over a 160 courts martial a day throughout the war compared to ten a day in 1913 - the letter of the law was not applied to every breach of discipline.⁴ The most common offences for which men were tried were absence without leave (81,188), drunkenness (41,762), desertion (38,630 - of which only

¹ J. Putkowski and J. Sykes, *Shot at Dawn*, London, 1989, pp. 19-20.

² Bilton, *Hull Pals*, p. 246.

³ F. Manning, *The Middle Parts of Fortune*, London, 1977 edn., p. 122. Arranging an execution in the presence of a condemned man's battalion was another matter, however, the provocative and deeply resented implication being that discipline needed a jolt. Putkowski and Sykes, *Shot at Dawn*, p. 12.

⁴ Beckett, 'The nation in arms', p. 23.

7,361 cases were in the field), insubordination (30,082) and loss of property (28,754).¹ In the month of April 1917, for instance, the number of courts martial convictions in the 5th Army was as follows: cowardice - 3; leaving post - 2; sleeping on post - 3; violence to superior - 11; wilful defiance and insubordinate conduct or language -21; disobedience (simple) -21; desertion - 23; absence - 120 (11 cases while in England); theft, fraud or embezzlement - 8; drunk -51; self inflicted wounds - 15; miscellaneous - 50; 328 cases in all.²

However, the majority of such offences generally met with low sentences, the most common of which were 3 and 6 months detention, stoppages and fines, reductions in rank and Field Punishment. Viewed by the authorities as essential to the maintenance of discipline - Haig believed that its abolition would lead directly to an escalation in the number and seriousness of offences and in turn raise the number of death sentences - Field Punishment was despised by the private soldier who saw it as deeply degrading. Many NCOs, too, who might have been expected to support it, condemned its effect on morale and questioned its worth as a deterrent.³ Brutal and undignified though it was, Field Punishment was nevertheless usually of short duration, typically 28 days. The army needed as many men in the field as possible. Binding a soldier to a wagon or sentencing him to hard labour meant the temporary withdrawal of a vital unit of production (though in practice men invariably served their sentences while remaining with their units, their punishment served during rest periods - the Suspended Sentences Act of 1915 ensured that soldiers remained with their unit rather than be sent home to be imprisoned, their sentence effectively deferred for the duration of the war. This removed the temptation for soldiers to view a criminal act as a possible method of escape from the front line); condemning a man to death removed him permanently.

There were, therefore, very practical reasons why the army's military code was administered with a degree of flexibility in the front-line. But there existed, too, more

¹ *Statistics of the Military Effort*, p. 670.

² 5th Army war diary.

³ 'Enquiry into Field Punishment No. 1', 1919, WO 32/5460/5461, PRO. Though army regulations strictly forbade Field Punishment for NCOs - in the belief that it would do irreparable damage to the status and authority of the NCO - evidence indicates that some units were at least prepared to consider it as a last resort to address NCO wrong doing. 4th Army war diary ('4th army notes'), p. 42, WO 95/442, PRO.

altruistic motives for the mitigation of offences. Military court hearings were conducted not by staff officers - regulars with orthodox views on discipline but little experience of the front-line - but by regimental officers, men who as volunteers themselves lacked the disciplinary exactitude of the regular soldier and who possessed first-hand knowledge of life in the trenches. Cases that should officially have warranted harsh sentences were met with compassion by officers who were well aware of the impact trench warfare could have on their men.¹ The commutation of serious offences such as sleeping on duty, an offence which officially carried the death penalty, was commonplace.² Many offences in fact never got as far as the court martial stage. Charges of a relatively minor nature were left to the discretion of company commanding officers who either dismissed them or more routinely presented the defendant with the choice of a court martial or an on-the-spot punishment; the latter, unsurprisingly, proving the more popular choice of offenders. Dick Williams recalled a fellow private whose drunkenness caused him to 'go missing' for several days. An act that could have been interpreted as desertion was treated instead with leniency by the soldier's company officer, who sentenced the culprit to a brief Field Punishment on his reappearance.³ Frank Richards was another who was discovered drunk on duty. In his defence, Richards pleaded that 'lightning attacks of rheumatic paralysis' had caused him to stagger and fall at the least opportune moments.⁴ One suspects that the originality of his tale may have gone some way to earning Richards a month's Field Punishment instead of a court martial. A more probable factor in his defence, though, was Richards' exemplary combat record. Officers were more likely to treat with compassion men who had proven themselves in battle and Richards had certainly done that.⁵

Acts of clemency by New Army and Territorial officers should not blind us to the fact that many regular battalions, especially elite units, persisted with a strict application of the

¹ J. Peaty, 'Haig and Military Discipline', in B. Bond and N. Cave (eds.), *Haig: A Reappraisal 70 Years On*, Barnsley, 1999, p. 196;

² Johnston, memoir, p. 36; Ricketts, memoir, p. 32.

³ Williams, 'An Artilleryman's War', p. 27.

⁴ F. Richards, *Old Soldiers Never Die*, London, 1994 edn., p. 84.

⁵ Macdonald, "1914-18", pp. 148-9. A. Barker, oral testimony, [H]ull [L]ocal [S]tudies [L]ibrary.

military code. Offences which met with leniency in New Army units were clamped down hard upon in many regular battalions. A private of the 15th Kings Hussars found guilty of sleeping at his post in October 1914 received a suspended sentence of five years imprisonment whilst two others were given two years for being drunk on duty.¹ Nor should they disguise the fact that discipline in the volunteer battalions intensified on active service, the transition from training to war proving almost unendurable for some men.² But the army's disciplinary code was not administered without mercy. As John Terraine has recognised, British discipline was designed to cater for a Regular force and its rough recruits: the number of death sentences commuted indicates 'reason and compassion' rather than brutality.³

3.3 The NCO and front line discipline

The regimental officer's position in the military hierarchy afforded him considerable power to moderate the impact of military law on the rank and file, but it was the NCO who was arguably best placed to shield men from some of the worst excesses of the army's disciplinary code. Officers were expected to, and indeed did, play a far more pro-active role in the maintenance of discipline in the trenches than they had done in pre-war barracks. But the daily execution and supervision of discipline remained, as in peacetime, largely in the hands of the NCO. The autonomy granted to the NCO made him the army's de facto arbiter of discipline and provided him with considerable scope to dilute the impact of orders and, in some instances, even overturn them. Evidence suggests that though they were formally expected to apply the letter of the law to any breach of discipline, NCOs, like their officers, displayed restraint in their application of army regulations. J. M. Cordy recalled a senior NCO who temporarily placed 'on hold' what he knew to be a dangerously ill-judged order.⁴ Elsewhere, one veteran recorded with fondness the action of a sympathetic sergeant whose position enabled him to effectively quash the punishment passed on the author. Charged with

¹ T. H. Cubbon, memoir, 5.10.14, 78/4/1, IWM. For the severe punishments handed out in the Coldstream Guards, see J. Ellis *Eye-deep in Hell: The Western Front*, London, 1976, p. 32.

² Latham, *Territorial*, p. 45.

³ J. Terraine, *The Right of the Line*, London, 1985, p. 528.

⁴ J. M. Cordy, memoir, 86/30/1, IWM, p. 9.

failing to give an adequate salute on parade, T. Penrose Marks was served with extra drill by a pernicky officer. Supervision of the fatigue, however, fell to Penrose Marks' senior NCO who took him safely out of sight and promptly let him off.¹

Well placed to shield his men from the 'bullshit' showered from above, the NCO was also ideally positioned to prevent offences committed by his men from reaching the attention of their officers. Coming across two soldiers asleep at a listening post, J. W. Riddell decided that since there were four others present and awake he would let it pass.² Joe Pincombe, a corporal with the 1st Queen's Westminster Rifles, found a youth of no more than eighteen staggering in the wrong direction during the battle of Passchendaele. Realising the implications and aware of a provost marshal behind, Pincombe ushered the youth towards the stretcher-bearers and ordered him to the dressing-station, thus legitimising his perambulations.³ Such actions were not without risk for the NCO, who himself faced possible punishment if discovered. The fog of combat no doubt helped Pincombe to evade detection, but Riddell was not so fortunate and was reprimanded by an inspecting officer who subsequently discovered the men asleep. John Lucy was similarly chastised following his intervention on behalf of one of his men. The man, who had temporarily quit his post in a search of food, was found and reported by Lucy. Lucy, however, reported the culprit as having been caught much closer to his post than he actually was, thereby removing a possible charge of desertion. Thanks to Lucy's intervention the private received only a minor reprimand. Lucy, however, was given a serious dressing down on a charge of neglect of duty and was warned to visit his posts more frequently.⁴

There were limits to what an NCO could and would do. NCOs took their disciplinary lead from their platoon and company officers who in turn were guided by the ethos of the commanding officer. Even a wholly sympathetic NCO could do little to temper discipline in a unit with a determined martinet at its head. Moreover, some offences such as drunkenness

¹ T. Penrose Marks, *The Laughter Goes from Life*, London, 1977, p. 82.

² Riddell, memoir, p. 70.

³ L. Macdonald, *They called it Passchendaele: The story of the Third Battle of Ypres and of the men who fought in it*, London, 1983, p. 145.

⁴ Lucy, *Devil in the Drum*, pp. 277-8.

were more 'visible' than others and difficult if not impossible to conceal. Yet the actions of Lucy indicate that even apparently cut and dried cases could be massaged into conciliation.

For a NCO to protect his subordinates did not necessarily demand an act of professional self-sacrifice. Worthy but incautious acts were not uncommon, but most NCOs chose to operate within the law, or at least in the margins of *Kings Regulations*, easing the strain on their men by acts of stealth rather than hubris. The watchful NCO might prevent a breach of discipline from occurring in the first place or at the very least check its escalation. Lucy, for instance, threw stones and clumps of earth at his men to keep them alert before an attack.¹ As its chief executives of discipline, NCOs were well aware of the parameters of the army's disciplinary code. A. H. Roberts' knowledge of military law gave him the confidence to complain to his company commander about the poor condition of his unit's billets. In his rage the officer threatened to have Roberts' stripe removed. Roberts, however, had calculated this to be outside the officer's power.²

But many NCOs did risk their stripes for their men. NCOs like Pincombe, Riddell and Lucy all made deliberate decisions to circumvent the law in the interests of their comrades, fully aware that in so doing they were putting their own necks on the line. Their motivation was a mix of compassion, common sense and a sureness of their own worth. The action of Pincombe appears to have been prompted in part by the army's policy on executions, which he saw as morally contestable. He also had personal experience of combat and its emotional strain and therefore some sympathy for the youth who he possibly deduced to be neurasthenic.³ Riddell was a seasoned regular whose pre-war service had provided him with ample time to digest every line of military law; active service had highlighted to him its inadequacies when applied to the reality of the trenches. Riddell's was a pragmatic response to local conditions rather than the strict adherence to an inadequate rule-book. The motive behind Lucy's act of largesse can only be guessed at. His gesture may simply have been one of goodwill for a comrade. Or he may have acted out of conscience, perhaps having himself

¹ Ibid., p. 222.

² A. H. Roberts, diary, 30.7.15, 81/23/1, IWM.

³ Macdonald, *Passchendaele*, p. 145

authorised the offender to scavenge some scraps for the section's stove. Like Riddell, Lucy was a pre-war regular with invaluable knowledge and experience and not easily replaceable. It may, therefore, have been an awareness of his own value that emboldened Lucy, who perhaps estimated that whatever punishment he received was likely to be slight.¹

Of course, not all infringements of discipline were met with conciliation. Whether a NCO reacted with leniency to a breach of discipline or applied the strict letter of the law depended on the perpetrator. 'The NCO,' wrote Wyn Griffith, a company commander in the 15th Royal Welsh Fusiliers, had to 'keep firm in his mind a critical assessing of the worth of his friends in varying emergencies, and a sober valuation of men whom he did not like.'² The most diligent NCO had a thorough knowledge of every man in his platoon or section and knew each well enough to decide which individuals needed firm handling and those who were likely to respond best to a softer approach. He knew their individual characters, their emotional strengths and weaknesses; he identified the men who responded to good humour and those who were receptive only to the barked order or threatened charge. Just like his officer, the NCO was most likely to turn a blind eye to the misdemeanour of a wayward but essentially brave or hard-working man. Discovered asleep on duty, Eric Hiscock was convinced that his sergeant would have shot him on the spot had he not been on a dangerous raid the night before.³

Acts of intervention by NCOs were not infrequently motivated by a desire to protect men who they viewed not merely as subordinates but as comrades and friends.⁴ One suspects, however, that it was practical considerations that more commonly led NCOs to turn a blind eye to disciplinary offences. The nature of the trenches, both in composition and condition, militated against the strict enforcement of discipline. Zigzagged to prevent enemy enfilade, the basic design of the trenches restricted the observation of men by NCOs and officers. So

¹ That the army was at pains to keep hold of its best NCOs is evidenced by its insistence that no commanding officer be permitted to simultaneously reduce a NCO and send him back to England without clearance from GHQ. 1st Army war diary, 18.4.15, WO 95/184, PRO.

² W. Griffith, *Up to Mametz*, London, 1988 edn., p. 136.

³ E. Hiscock, *The Bells of Hell go Ting-a-ling-a-ling*, London, 1976, p. 35. Heath, memoir, p. 53.

⁴ L. Macdonald, 1915, p. 266; P. M. Morris, 'Leeds and the Amateur Military Tradition: the Leeds Rifles and its antecedents', unpublished Ph. D. thesis, Leeds University, 1983, p. 932.

too did their complexity. The front-line was not one single arterial trench but a labyrinth of communication lines, listening-posts and firing points. Inspecting each and every scion at regular intervals was difficult in ideal conditions; bad weather and enemy fire frequently rendered the task hazardous if not impossible. A. H. Roberts was placed under arrest for failing to post sentries, his officer paying little heed to the fact that the NCO's jurisdiction extended some 800 yards over uneven duck-boards across which he had to traverse under cover of darkness.¹ In the course of his everyday round of duties the NCO would have been witness to numerous infractions of discipline, some serious but most minor. Efficiency had to be maintained, but to pursue every offence would have tested the stamina and sanity of the most diligent NCO. A wilfully negligent act that threatened the safety of a unit prompted immediate arrest. But the number of minor breaches of discipline that met with no more than a stern word of warning, a tactfully turned eye or even a knowing wink can only be guessed at.

The NCO was also faced with a personal dilemma. As the army's chief executor of discipline he had to be seen to apply the letter of the law. But he also had to face the consequences of his orders. Like the factory foreman who might be caught between the demands for maximum output and the need to maintain social relations with those under him, the NCO was engaged in a constant struggle to execute his orders without compromising relations with his men. Unlike the pre-war NCO who could issue an unpalatable directive and retire to the sanctuary of his mess, unburdened by the need to court popularity or the worry of possible retaliation, the NCO in the front-line had no escape; he was bound to his men. Orders were orders, of course, and the NCO possessed the authority to sanction any private soldier whose response was anything but unconditional. In reality, however, it made good sense, both in terms of efficiency and for his own piece of mind, for the NCO to be on good terms with men with whom he ate, worked, drilled and shared almost every other aspect of life in the

¹ Roberts, diary, 20.8.15. As a platoon commander Graham Greenwell found himself with sole responsibility for a 300-yard stretch of front. G. Greenwell, *An Infant in Arms*, London, 1972, p. 59.

line.¹ The possibility of more serious recriminations must also have influenced the actions of NCOs. The actual number of murders committed in the trenches is of course unknowable. Official figures shed little if any light on the details surrounding ‘accidental’ deaths, while the memoirs of veterans are unlikely to yield information on the subject since few men would admit an act of murder to their diaries. Amidst the confusion of war, however, the odds against a man being killed by ‘friendly fire’ were not improbable. For the over-zealous NCO who had earned the contempt of his unit, the odds on being shot by a ‘stray’ bullet must have shortened. Murder, though rare, was certainly committed. Lance corporal William Price and Private Richard Morgan of the Welsh Fusiliers bayoneted to death a sergeant who they claimed had been victimising them. They killed, as it happened, the wrong man: a company sergeant major who they mistakenly took to be their despised platoon sergeant.² A trench journal could make light of the matter: ‘Don’t argue with an N.C.O. if you have a grievance; nights are dark and bricks are handy.’³ But the possibility of reprisal must have been a consideration for NCOs, if only a subconscious one.

NCOs did, however, manage to confront infringements of discipline without being confrontational. Despite being a hard taskmaster, F. H. Keeling felt that the basis of his authority was the goodwill of his subordinates that he had nurtured over time. Keeling had his fair share of problems with some of his more difficult men who were ‘in and out of clink regularly for drunkenness and answering back to NCOs’. Yet he was able to wed his role as disciplinarian to that of ‘confidant’ and ‘pal’. ‘I am,’ he confessed, ‘rather proud of the fact that I have managed to get on good terms with them and at the same time got some control over them’. Keeling was, like the best NCOs, a man who relied less on his institutional authority than his strength of character and personal charisma; a man whose natural authority was so established and unquestioned that the friendliness of his manner was not likely to be

¹ Anon, ‘Informal Social Organisation in the Army’, *The American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 51, 1945-6, p. 369.

² The incident is commemorated, albeit inaccurately, by Robert Graves in his poem *Sergeant Money*. Graves, though he served in the same unit, joined three months after the incident and much of the content of the poem was based on hearsay. For a more accurate retelling see Putkowski and Sykes, *Shot at Dawn*, p. 34.

³ ‘The Very Light’. *The Journal of the 19th Battalion Manchester Regiment*, No. 1, March, 1917, p. 3.

misunderstood or taken advantage of. Some NCOs may have sought refuge behind the demand for blind obedience, but Keeling's legitimacy rested less on his authorisation to wield a big stick than the respect and affection of his subordinates.'

That strict discipline and good relations were not mutually exclusive is evidenced by the many memoirs that pay fond tribute to NCOs who were tough disciplinarians. Ernest Shepherd mourned the death of a fellow CSM and close friend, a martinet on the drill square who licked into shape the most 'unruly Coy in the Battalion' yet whose men 'are terribly cut up over him'.² The same sentiments were echoed by a ranker of the 1st Battalion, Bedfordshire Regiment, who paid tribute to a Sergeant Freeman, 'a strict disciplinarian.. .well liked by the men of his platoon'.³ Elsewhere, we find another memoirist writing with great affection for a Sergeant Ross, another 'strict disciplinarian' whose death during the war was keenly felt by his platoon, but whose personal loss to the author was 'so great as to be still felt a decade after his death'.⁴

Many NCOs recognised that the private soldier would more readily tolerate strict discipline from a superior who had shown himself capable of humanity. But not all NCOs chose to be conciliatory in their administration of the army's military code. Despite the loss of many of their pre-war NCOs and a dilution of citizen volunteers, most regular battalions remained firm in their commitment to strict discipline, at least in the first few years of the war. Even in the most desperately poor conditions, elite units maintained a commitment to rigorous formality in the front line. Guardsmen in the Grenadiers were obliged to stand to attention when speaking to their officers and NCOs, while officers and NCOs were expected to shave daily regardless of the shortage of water.⁵ Robert Graves, who served with the Welsh Fusiliers, recalled that in the trenches NCOs were expected to be addressed at all times by their rank and for a private to address a corporal by his Christian name was deemed an act of

¹ Townshend, *Keeling Letters*, p. 199.

² E. Shepherd, *A Sergeant Major's War*, London, 1987 edn. p. 75.

³ *The "Mudlark". Journal of the 1st Battalion The Bedfordshire Regiment*, June 1916.

⁴ "Anon", *Artillery and Trench Mortar Memoirs*, London, 1933, p. 677,

⁵ L. Macdonald, *Somme*, London, 1993, p. 263.

insubordination.¹ Another veteran recalled that discipline was as strict as ever in his unit. Discipline, he maintained, was underpinned with constant reminders and threats from NCOs, warning men of the dire consequences of offences such as sleeping on duty (in fact, no regular battalion ever actually carried out the death sentence for that particular offence; the only incidences - two in total - of men shot for falling asleep at their posts occurred, interestingly, in Kitchener units).² Burgoyne recalled a sentence of ten years penal servitude being handed to a private who struck a lance corporal.³ Even relatively minor offences were likely to meet with a punishment that far outweighed the crime. A. H. Roberts was arrested for being five minutes late for a fatigue, while Frank Richards wrote indignantly of the occasion when a man lying beside him was spotted by a sergeant to have slipped his equipment off: 'The NCO showed little sympathy for the fact that the soldier had been marching hard for several days. He received 28 days Field Punishment No. 1',⁴

We should, therefore, be careful not to assume that there was a wholesale relaxation of discipline in the front line. Nevertheless, as the war drew on the army's obsessive adherence to a pre-war style of discipline became unsustainable. Regular units bore the brunt of the early engagements of the war and high casualty' rates amongst regular officers and NCOs weakened the command structure of many units. By the second half of the conflict, casualties had all but eroded the difference between the trained personnel of regular and New Army formations. Writing in the summer of 1918, General J. Jack observed that his old battalion was largely unrecognisable as a regular unit: 'Although my battalion is labelled "Regular" it contains no greater number of trained personnel than Territorial or New Army battalions. Perhaps we have one or two more experienced warrant and non-commissioned officers than they.'⁵ Jack's unit was luckier than most to have preserved a cadre of regular NCOs, capable of sustaining the disciplinary ethos of the regiment. But few other regular units were as fortunate, and the shortage of old-style regular NCOs in some battalions

¹ Graves, *Goodbye*, p. 150.

² Putkowski and Sykes, *Shot at Dawn*, p. 298.

³ Davison, *Burgoyne Diaries*, p. 46.

⁴ Richards, *Old Soldiers*, p. 28.

⁵ J. Terraine (ed.), *General Jack's Diary*, London, 1964, p. 247.

contributed to a more relaxed attitude to discipline.¹ Frank Richards recalled that by the middle of the war ‘Discipline was still good in the Battalion, but not so severe as it had been, and gone were the days when a man could be punished for having the lace of his rifle sling not properly tied.’² Discipline remained crucial to security and efficiency and even front line New Army and Territorial units continued to observe a strict daily routine of duties and inspections. Yet they were small-scale affairs, their emphasis less on pomp than purpose. With more urgent occupations to perform, the peacetime pedantry of button polishing and pipe-claying was generally put on hold. As one veteran recognised: ‘Provided a man kept his rifle clean and attended to his duties, not much more was required of him.’³

Troops in the front-line tended not to exploit the absence of protocol. They recognised the connection between discipline and self-preservation and that the consequence of any action that flouted procedure could be death. Indeed, formally imposed discipline was traded for self-discipline by many New Army and Territorial battalions, officers and NCOs relying to a large extent on the restraint of their men for efficiency and order. The extent to which discipline was relaxed in his unit came as a shock to Edwin Campion Vaughan, a temporary officer in the 1 /8th Royal Warwickshire Regiment. Shortly after joining his new battalion in the line, Vaughan came across two senior NCOs who, he recalled, ‘Both saluted, and having eyed me up and down, and taken thorough stock of me, proceeded to smoke and lounge about whilst I questioned them. My sense of discipline received a severe shock but I hesitated to choke them off, as they appeared to be behaving in a manner usual to them’. Vaughan was equally astonished by a later incident where, following a brief inspection of the trenches, a corporal reported “all correct” to his sergeant with a cigarette in his hand. When Vaughan reproved the sergeant for his subordinate’s demeanour, the senior NCO raised his eyebrows in blank amazement and replied “Why, sir! It’s always done up here”.⁴ Another veteran remembered the men of his platoon taking off their tunics and shirts in the front line

¹ J. Brent Wilson, ‘The Morale and Discipline of the BEF, 1914-18’, unpublished M.A. thesis, University of New Brunswick, Canada, 1978, p. 145.

² Richards, *Old Soldiers*, p. 204.

³ Latham, *Territorial*, p. 23.

⁴ E. C. Vaughan, *Some Desperate Glory*, London, 1994 edn., pp. 8, 16.

apparently unflustered by the approach of their sergeant who was clearly relaxed about their activities.¹ But over time Vaughan came to realise that there was less of a need for formally imposed discipline at the front. Every man who had spent some time in the line knew his job and the importance of it, knew what was expected of him and did not need to be told what to do. Vaughan conceded that once in the front-line troops who he had felt obliged to bully and push when out of the trenches had now ‘quietly melted away and taken up their duties’.²

The nature of the trench environment, too, reduced the need for formally imposed discipline. There were occasions when NCO and officer shortages left men unsupervised for considerable periods.³ But there was little scope for deviancy in the front-line. Once in the trenches, soldiers ‘entered a closed, subterranean world where compressed physical space and the ...ubiquitous, arbitrary nature of shelling and rifle and machine-gun fire in an active sector meant that disobeying a command was generally no less dangerous than obeying it’.⁴ The same trenches that prohibited the soldier’s constant surveillance also restricted his movement. It is no coincidence that the French mutinies that followed the failed offensive along the Chemin des Dames in the spring of 1917, took place not at the front but at embarkation points behind the lines.⁵ Courts martial figures for desertion indicate that the soldier’s best opportunity to absent himself from his unit was when out of the trenches, be it in his unit’s withdrawal from the front-line or when ordered up to the front or on leave back home: in four years of fighting 38,630 Allied troops were found guilty of desertion, only 7,361 of whom were charged with desertion in the field.⁶

The emphasis on self rather than imposed discipline benefited the NCO. On a practical level it made the NCO’s job easier knowing that he could trust his men to maintain a reasonable level of efficiency without his constant vigil. Self-discipline, more significantly,

¹ Penrose Marks, *Laughter Goes From Life*, p. 66.

² Vaughan, *Some Desperate Glory*, pp. 16, 30.

³ 1st Bedfordshire Battalion war diary, October, 1917, BCRO.

⁴ L. V. Smith, ‘War and ‘Politics’: the French Army Mutinies of 1917, *War in History*, 2, 2, 1995, p. 183.

⁵ For an analysis of the French mutinies, see Smith, above, and also L.V. Smith, *Between Mutiny and Obedience: the Case of the French Fifth Infantry Division During WWI*, Princeton, 1994.

⁶ *Statistics of Military Effort*, p. 645.

minimised the need for formal rank assertion. The need for NCOs to stand on ceremony was diminished since, as one ranker recognised, ‘we knew who was in command and who to look to when decisions had to be made without delay’. NCOs in the trenches tended to be less confrontational than when behind the lines, ‘satisfied to leave the shouting...until such times when he himself would be watched by the RSM’.¹ One veteran thought that his platoon sergeant at the front was a far more relaxed and humane character than when in rear, secure in the knowledge that his men were ‘partners’ whose co-operation he could count on.² George Louth, who served with the 15th Hampshires, felt only contempt for his NCOs at home during training. His attitude changed at the front, however: ‘They are just the same as you when you’re in a trench,’ he wrote. ‘The sergeants didn’t shout their orders and the officers were friendlier, less strict.’³

3.5 Discipline behind the lines

The schedule of rotation between the front, support and reserve lines was interrupted by spells spent in the rest area where, usually located a few miles behind the reserve line, units were given a week or more to recuperate before being sent back into the combat zone. The material advantages of a move to the rear were many. Food was generally fresher, hotter and more plentiful than at the front while local *estaminets* supplemented and added variety to the army ration. Scarce in the line, water was abundant in rear areas, allowing for greater hygiene and, more importantly, the prospect of a hot bath. Shelter, too, was more often warmer and more secure in rear areas than the makeshift accommodation of the trenches (though enemy shelling might penetrate deep behind the lines, rendering billets uninhabitable).⁴ A move to the rest area restored troops emotionally as well as physically. It offered men respite, albeit temporary, from the psychological exhaustion of shell-fire and

¹ Shanahan, memoir, p. 19.

² Cliff, *Hell and Back*, pp. 37, 71.

³ R. Van Emden and S. Humphries (eds.), *Veterans*, Barnsley, 1998, p. 25.

⁴ C. E. Crutchley, *Machine Gunner 1914-18*, Northampton, 1973, p. 25; P. Glynn, *All That We Had, We Gave. The Story Of The Denbigh Territorials August 1914 — September 1915*, Denbeigh, 1999, p. 39; Rixon, diary, 27.7.15.

combat. Tension built up over weeks at the front found release in a wide range of organised sports, from inter-company and battalion cross country runs and tug of war contests to shooting, boxing and soccer competitions. Further diversion from the anxieties of war came via battalion concerts and theatres - some Divisions even had their own cinema - all encouraged and provided for by an army well aware of their importance to morale.¹ Most importantly, Divisional rest would often be in or close to a French town, allowing troops a welcome reminder, however fleeting, of civilian pleasures.

A move to the rest area was not all that it implied, however. Men were rested and re-nourished during their time out of the line but they were also worked extremely hard. Front line units had to be fed and fuelled by those in the rear and, despite the widespread use of specialist Labour Units, the bulk of the everyday fetching and carrying fell to the infantry: working parties, wiring parties, carrying parties, were all undertaken during official rest periods. A sizeable proportion of the time spent in the rear was given over to training, both physical and technical. Physical drill had its purpose out of the line, restoring troops to combat fitness after weeks of torpor in cramped trenches; as too did specialist training in bomb defence and attack, wood fighting, map reading and musketry, all of which were much needed since little could be practised in the confined spaces of the trenches.²

It was, however, parade-ground drills and inspections that absorbed the largest chunk of the soldier's period of 'rest'. A move to the rear signalled a return to the spit and polish so characteristic of the peacetime army. Troops resented the return of 'bullshit', for a number of reasons.³ The first and most obvious was that they expected, at least the first time around, a move to the rest line to mean just that: a period of unbroken rest and recuperation. Having risked their lives and laboured hard for weeks in difficult circumstances they felt deserving of

¹ Maxse. *Hints on training issued by XVIII Corps*, London, 1918, p.6. A not untypical Divisional rest itinerary would be drill and training in the morning and early afternoon, followed by a football match and evening concert. 1st Bedfordshire Battalion war diary, Oct 1917.

² H. Mortimer, letter, 28.7.17, Fac 139/2-3, BCRO; Shepherd, *Sergeant Major's War*, p. 85.

³ On 'bullshit' see N. Dixon, *On The Psychology Of Military Incompetence*, London, 1976, chapter 16.

it. Yet instead of being lionised for their endeavours they were greeted with hard work and petty cavilling. S. Bradbury, who served first with the 1/5 Seaforths and later the Machine Gun Corps, was both astonished and dismayed at having to parade a second time purely because his entrenching tool was the wrong way round.¹ Recognised as necessary at the front, rear discipline was perceived as purposeless busying. The army's policy on button polishing encapsulates neatly the shift in priorities that accompanied a move from the front line to the rear. Troops in the line were strictly forbidden to shine their buttons and brasses lest their lustre alert the attention of the enemy; out of the line, however, they were meticulously burnished. A reply given to a staff inquiry as to the morale of one battalion found that men grumbled more about drills and parades than the hardships of cold and rain; the latter they saw as inevitable, the former they thought avoidable.²

A measure of refurbishment was necessary since weeks spent in unsanitary conditions left troops unkempt and slovenly. But the preoccupation with spit and polish had less to do with cleanliness than formality. The return to formality underlined the army's determination to reassert its institutional authority after the perceived disciplinary slackness of the front line. The authorities recognised that a move to the rear engendered a change in the attitude of troops. The self-disciplining constraints of the front that had kept men in check were now gone; confined trenches were replaced by open spaces and the threat of death by security. After weeks of emotional fatigue and tension troops were determined to let off steam. Men therefore had to be occupied if they were not to be distracted.³

Units stationed in quiet sectors might be spared the endless round of fatigues and drills. Rixon's time spent in the Bullay Grenay sector was taken up by 'a bit of drill' in the mornings, after which he was left to his own devices.⁴ But the overwhelming picture of life behind the lines is one of graft and punctiliousness. One veteran observed that 'Soldiers who

¹ S. Bradbury, memoir, p. 43, 81/35/1, IWM.

² E. Wyrall, *The History of the Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry 1914-19*, London, 1932, p. 143.

³ The authorities' fears were not entirely without justification. Crime rates, especially for drunkenness, rose significantly out of the line, but declined with the resumption of trench holding duties. Brent Wilson, 'Morale and Discipline', pp. 74-5, 199.

⁴ Rixon, diary, 13.6.15.

could be relied on to remain cheerful in the most exposed trenches in the front line became unwilling and resentful on fatigue'.¹ Another, a former NCO, commissioned into the 16th Manchesters, thought the morale of his troops better the nearer to the front line 'doing the job they were trained for rather than idling'.² Sergeant A. V. Young claimed that his men were only happy when they knew 'they were going where the fighting was'.³ Doubtless there were men for who combat appealed. But Young's observation is evidence less of the intrinsic attraction of the front-line than the contempt felt by many for army life behind the lines. Private J. B. Mackenzie damned the rear culture and seemed prepared to accept the scarcity of food, water and sleep of the front in exchange: 'I would much rather be in the trenches than out here, as it is nothing else but parades and inspections.'⁴

3.6 . The NCO and discipline behind the lines

The army's commitment to discipline out of the line had implications for the NCO and his relationship with his men. It was not just the private soldier who was subject to strict discipline and close scrutiny behind the lines. Platoon sergeants and section corporals who had acted as their own masters at the front now found themselves under the watchful gaze of the adjutant and battalion sergeant major. Company sergeant majors were duty bound to their men and accompanied them up the line and into combat. The principal responsibility of the battalion sergeant major, however, was for discipline out of the trenches, and most gained a reputation for rarely venturing too close to the combat zone - though, in fairness, headquarters staff regularly accompanied their battalion as far as the reserve line, which often proved as hazardous as the front line.⁵ The substitution of the formalism of the rear for the relatively easy self-discipline of the front-line made the NCO's life more difficult. Where he had coaxed his men in the trenches, the NCO now had to be seen to drive them. The slightest

¹ C. Douie, *The Weary Road*, Stevenage, 1988 edn., p. 110.

² T. A. M. Nash (ed.), *The Diary of an Unprofessional Soldier*, Chippenham, 1991, p. 19.

³ A. V. Young, diary, 8.3.17, 76/101/1, IWM.

⁴ J. B. Mackenzie, letter, 6.7.15, 87/62/1, IWM.

⁵ Coppard, *Machine-gun*, p. 29.

departure from correct behaviour had to be addressed and infringements of discipline that had met with discretion in the trenches could no longer be ignored.

The NCO was also faced with the invidious task of ordering troops who were no longer shackled by the physical constraints of the trenches and, moreover, whose thoughts were no longer preoccupied with survival. Worse, evidence indicates that the move to the rear may have eroded the prestige of the NCO. Post Second World War studies have revealed that it is in high stress situations that authority figures have the strongest influence, since men most look to their superiors for guidance and protection in times of crisis. In the First World War, the heightened risks of the front line underlined to troops the value of their NCOs' knowledge and leadership, especially under the crisis conditions of the battlefield. There, men recognised the legitimate, intrinsic authority of their officers and NCOs; for upon it their lives depended. Away from the danger zone, that dependency was diminished and with it the authority of the officer and NCO.¹

The difficulties encountered by the NCO in the retirement to the rear should not be overstated, however. Even if one concedes that some erosion of his prestige accompanied the departure from the trenches, the NCO still had the full weight of his official authority to call on. Moreover, the extent to which the NCO's status was actually diminished is itself open to question. NCOs whose qualities in the front line had earned them the respect and trust of their men were not now suddenly vilified. Instead, acts of consideration performed in the trenches secured them a cache of goodwill, one which they carried with them to the rear and which provided them with some collateral against the damage caused to relations by the return to pedantry.² Indeed, it is probable that those NCOs who were liked and viewed with respect in the trenches were seen as such in the rear, whereas NCOs who were held in contempt at the front found themselves doubly despised when out of the line.

¹ D. C. Korten, 'Situational Determinants of Leadership Structure', *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 6, 1962, p. 230.

² P. J. Campbell, *In the Cannon's Mouth*, London, 1979, p. 100. Prestige might operate in reverse. The NCO who commanded respect on the football field might carry it with him to the battlefield.

Nevertheless, in war, as in peacetime, the NCO was the subject of much derision. As the army's chief custodian of discipline, the NCO represented the private soldier's most immediate point of contact with military authority and consequently his principal target of abuse. Individual NCOs were singled out for special condemnation. E.A. Cannon, of the 3rd Res. Bn. Royal Fusiliers, nicknamed one of his NCOs 'the butcher' through his 'bullying and threatening ways', whilst George Hindle held in deep contempt a pair of sadistic sergeant majors who took immense delight in 'placing men under arrest and reading out sentence, especially those of death'.¹ But it tended to be the rank itself that was viewed with hostility rather than any particular individual. 'To us,' wrote George Coppard, 'everybody in authority was a bastard of some kind, and the RSM, a decent bloke really, was the subject of many vain boasts to do him in at the first horrible opportunity. But,² just as in peacetime, men were capable of seeing beyond the NCO's rank and distinguishing between the man delivering unpalatable orders and the source of their origin. The private soldier recognised that the NCO in the rear was subject to the same discipline as he. 'The NCO,' wrote one veteran, 'was bullied by his superiors just as we were bullied by ours. He was bullied into being a bully. And his superiors were bullied by their superiors.'³ Troops acknowledged that it was the parameters of their relationship with their NCOs that changed once they left the line, not the NCOs themselves. Commented one trench journal: 'The recruit who has got the right stuff in him usually learns quickly that the bluster and violence of his squad instructor are put on for the occasion.'⁴

In examining the nature of discipline behind the lines a distinction must be made, between the regimental NCO and his base depot counterpart. The goodwill felt by troops for their own NCOs was not, as we have seen, extended to the NCOs of the Battalion HQ staff. Any hostility felt towards HQ staff was as nought, however, compared to the contempt felt for those NCOs who populated the army's base depots. New drafts arriving in France were not

¹ E. A. Cannon, diary, 12.12.15, [L]eeds [U]niversity [L]ibrary, [L]iddle [C]ollection; George Hindle, diary, privately held, p. 4.

² Coppard, *Machine Gun*, p. 47.

³ F. A. Voigt, *Combed Out*, London, 1929, p.20.

⁴ "Thumbs Up". *Journal of the 260 Coy Army Service Corps*, Vol.1, No. 2, March 1916, p. 75.

thrown immediately into action. Instead they were sent to either of two principal transit depots: Etaples, the larger of the two, took those men disembarking at Boulogne whilst Harfleur served the port of Le Havre. Although their intake included veterans returning from injury who were deemed in need of toning up before being sent into the field, the depots functioned primarily as ‘finishing schools’ for untested recruits. Troops received instruction and practice in activities geared to the specific demands of trench warfare, such as gas drill, but most of their time was occupied practising those same elements of basic training with which they were already well acquainted.

Discipline in the depots was akin to pre-war days, characterised by a rigid adherence to routine and strict surveillance. Reveille at Harfleur was at 4.30 and lights out at both depots was nine o’clock. Inside the depot at Harfleur the authorities fashioned a panopticon of sorts by insisting that all tent walls be rolled up from dawn till dusk. Outside, the local towns were off limits (thanks in part to quarantine restrictions) to any troops who had been in the camp for less than eight days.¹ A schedule of almost constant work and drill broken only by occasional periods of deadening boredom created a climate of resentment, one which was felt by officers as well as other ranks.² It was a climate created in part by the actions of the camp NCOs (nicknamed Canaries after their distinctive yellow armbands). The disciplinary approach of the NCOs appears to have ranged from casual indifference to wilful callousness. Virtually no differentiation was made between new recruits and veterans. Seasoned soldiers returning to the front from injury received no acknowledgement and were forced to practise procedures that were viewed at best as superfluous and patronising.³ Some NCOs, especially those at Etaples, took delight in goading and badgering men, one senior NCO, known as “Black Jack”, gained special notoriety for his vindictive ways.⁴

¹ I. R. Bet-El, *Conscripts. Lost Legions of the Great War*, Stroud, 1999, pp. 71-3; “Mark VII”, *A Subaltern on the Somme*, London, 1928, p. 14; H. Bartlett, memoir, p. 184, 81/14/1, IWM.

² “Mark VII”, p. 13; G. Seton, *Footslogger*, London, 1931, p. 174.

³ Phillips, ‘The Welsh Soldier in World War One’, p. 89; Coppard, *Machine-gun*, p. 106. Men were in fact split up and regrouped alphabetically, rather than kept with unit which itself caused resentment. W. V. Tilsley, *Other Ranks*, London, 1931, pp. 7-8.

⁴ R. D. Fisher, written account, 76/54/1, IWM, p. 4; Coppard, *Machine Gun*, p. 85.

There is little doubt that there was a brutish element amongst the base depot NCOs. Yet this was to be anticipated. As in peacetime, it was the 'old soldier type' who tended to gravitate to the base depots. NCOs there were invariably regulars, men either too old or unfit for the front-line. As regulars, they lacked the tact, sensitivity and perhaps intelligence of some of their New Army and Territorial counterparts.¹ The primary role of the base camp NCO was not, however, to forge cordial relations with the men temporarily under his command. His function was to brutalise the new drafts, firing men for what awaited them at the front. Troops were insulted on parade, humiliated on route marches and bawled at during bayonet practice, the zealotry of their NCO instructors designed to inculcate the offensive spirit and foster a hatred of the enemy.² By demonising the base depot NCOs and making the general tenor of life in the camps as inhospitable as possible, the authorities aimed to ensure that troops when eventually moved up the line to their battalions would look favourably upon their new environment and their own NCOs.

The testimonies of some of those men who passed through the depots indicate that they had the desired effect. Anthony French conceded that 'Never after did the firing line seem so desirable as it did during that fortnight'.³ Of his time spent at what was meant to be a convalescent camp at Rouen, another veteran insisted that the establishment was 'designed to make soldiers desire fervently to get away from it, even back to the very line itself'.⁴ Men were indeed prepared to go to extreme lengths to escape the depots. G. Dallas and D. Gill have found evidence to suggest that some troops at Etaples inflicted wounds upon themselves in an attempt to secure the 'punishment' that would send them back to the front.⁵ Interestingly, though, on the infamous Etaples 'mutiny' the two authors found no evidence to suggest that any depot NCOs were in any way responsible for the disturbances. In fact, the

¹ The medical officer at Etaples base laid the blame for the infamous 'Mutiny' of September, 1917 on the incompetence of the 'duffers' at the base, who, he insisted, were incapable of reading the situation and recognising the troops' grievances. J. H. Dible, diary, 11.9.17, con shelf, IWM.

² Graves, *Goodbye*, p. 161. Graves himself was for a short time an instructor at Harfleur base camp.

³ French, *Gone for a Soldier*, p. 27.

⁴ Glover, *Fateful Battle Line*, p. 62.

⁵ Dallas and Gill, *Unknown Army*, p. 90.

depot's war diary records that the animosity of the troops was directed solely at the Military Police.¹

For the majority of soldiers who passed through the depots, the experience was tolerable. Some memoirists described their time there as no more than 'boring', whilst others indicate that the depots even offered certain compensations. In a reserved occupation until the final year of the war, A. J. Abraham spent three days at Etaples in 1918, remembering it only for the luxury of eating tinned fruit, which was scarce in England. Base camp NCOs tended to be looked on with contempt by combat troops who viewed them as shirkers with little or no fighting knowledge. But many base depot NCOs were in fact themselves veterans, whose injuries had prevented them from returning to action, and in some quarters there was a grudging acknowledgement of the experience of the NCO instructors and their expertise in honing men to battle fitness.²

In fairness to the NCO instructors, they occupied a peculiarly invidious position. Unlike the regimental NCO who had trained and fought with his men and possessed the legitimate authority that came from familiarity and shared experience, the base depot NCO was an anonymous figure whose absence of any provable history meant he was obliged to rely solely on his institutional authority. The base depot NCO, moreover, had scant reason to be anything more than perfunctory in his dealings with troops with whom he had no ties and who in a matter of days would be out of his hands. Indeed, the fact that the soldier's stay in a transit camp was relatively brief - men might spend up to three weeks in a camp or as little as a single night, depending upon the urgency of demand - probably ensured that most men remained philosophical about their harsh treatment.³ Observed H. Ogle of the base depot NCO: '...he was tolerated with a fair amount of humour, for the men he bullied knew that they would soon be moving on...out of the sound of the everlasting bawling, of the raucous,

¹ Etaples Base camp war diary, 9.9.17, WO 95/4027, PRO

² V. F. Eberle, *My Sapper Venture*, London, 1973, p. 30; S. A. A. Lane, memoir, 97/10/1, IWM, p. 7; Abraham, memoir, p. 12; French, *Gone for a Soldier*, p. 27.

³ Bet-El, *Conscripts*, p. 71.

insolent cliché, the insufferably boring homilies, the boasting, the stamping, the grisly jests about Germans, the veiled or open threats of punishment, the insults to decent men.’¹

¹ Glover, *Fateful Battle Line*, p. 66.

Chapter 4: The NCO and morale

4.1 The NCO and ranker morale

Military morale may be broadly summarised as the relative willingness to fight of an individual soldier or unit. Unless a soldier is reasonably content with his lot, he is unlikely to perform to the best of his abilities. In extreme cases he may desert or mutiny. But since the penalties of such actions are likely to be severe, the soldier's unwillingness to fight will, like the disgruntled factory worker who chooses to air his grievances by working to rule, more commonly manifest itself in a reduction in the level of his economic performance. A decline in the morale of the individual soldier is in turn likely to have an adverse effect on the effectiveness of the group to which he belongs. In exceptional cases, individual discontent may contaminate an entire unit, damaging its collective spirit.¹ The ingredients thought necessary to ensure good morale in the British army in the First World War were as numerous as they were idiosyncratic: patriotism, religious conviction, revenge, even the rum ration; all emerge as factors influencing the soldier's willingness to fight.² At any one time there were a myriad factors influencing the morale of the British soldier on the Western Front. Many of those factors - officer paternalism, logistics, patriotism, popular culture - have all received attention from scholars in the field.³ The purpose of this chapter, however, is not to analyse each and every factor that helped forge and sustain morale, but to concentrate instead on those elements over which the NCO had a direct influence.

The military authorities believed that high morale was achievable through a combination of material provision and discipline. Discipline itself was seen as a 'material' component of morale; the visible reward of effort and obedience. The disciplined man was by definition a fit and healthy soldier. Months of drill and physical training produced obvious

¹ I. McLaine, *Ministry of Morale*, London, 1979, p. 8.

² Frank Richards recalled that 'Whenever one of our men got shot by (Dum-Dum) bullets, some of us would cut the tips off our own bullets which made them expanding and then go sniping with them'. Richards, *Old Soldiers*, p. 78

³ S. P. Mackenzie, 'Morale and the Cause: The Campaign to Shape the Outlook of Soldiers of the British Expeditionary Force, 1914-18', *Canadian Journal of History*, XXV, 1990, pp. 217-32; G. D. Sheffield, 'Officer-Man Relations, Morale and Discipline in the British Army, 1902-22', unpublished Ph. D. thesis, University of London, 1994; Brent Wilson, 'Morale and Discipline'; J. G. Fuller, *Troop Morale and Popular Culture in the British and Dominion Armies 1914-1918*, Oxford, 1918.

physical benefits. Discipline also yielded a mental reward. Drill and exercise produced men who were physically healthy, but also men who were morally sound, since the physically fit soldier enjoyed and took pride in his fitness and appearance. More importantly, the man who had shown himself prepared to submit to discipline was deemed the soldier most likely to possess the necessary 'character' to withstand the physical and emotional stresses of the battlefield. As well as the cause of good morale, discipline was in turn seen as the product of good morale. Discipline brought about a physical improvement in the soldier, but it also provided an accurate barometer of his morale. The smart, well-presented man who marched with his chin raised and shoulders pressed firmly back was a dutiful, effective soldier and a credit to his regiment; the man who failed in his appearance and was slovenly on the march was ill-disciplined, of suspect character and a reflection of a poor unit. Observed one veteran: 'An experienced officer can usually form a fairly accurate opinion of the fighting efficiency of a Battalion by seeing it on the march...Even if leg weary or footsore, good troops pull themselves together and march as if they were proud of themselves.'¹

It fell to the NCO, as the army's chief custodian of discipline, to ensure that troops on active service remained fit, healthy, efficient and therefore effective fighting units. The NCO adopted a proactive approach to the maintenance of efficiency in the front-line. He ensured that all arms and kit were kept clean and fully functional. He was scrupulous in watching what his men drank and ate, checking that their water was fresh and their food ration cooked, thus reducing the risk of infection that might force the temporary withdrawal of the soldier from action. Conditions permitting, the NCO was expected to see that his men observed strict rules of personal hygiene when in the line, ensuring that they washed daily, were clean-shaven and kept their uniform in an acceptable condition. Personal hygiene was in turn bound up with the trench environment. The NCO saw to it that his unit's stretch of trench was kept in as dry and hygienic a condition as was possible, supervising structural repairs and the maintenance of latrines. A clean, safe and well-maintained environment at once ensured and

¹ General de Lisle, *Notes On Minor Tactics Compiled From Lectures To Company Officers On Active Service*, London, 1920, p. 13. Almost twenty years on, discipline was still seen as the cornerstone of military efficiency. HMSO, *Infantry Training (Training and War)*, London, 1937, p. 11.

reflected the physical and emotional well-being of the soldier. Like the disciplined battalion on the march, exhausted but dogged, the unit which strove to maintain a decent standard of health and safety in appalling conditions gave assurance of its commitment and morale. Slack standards, conversely, betrayed apathy and were the first visible manifestation of poor morale.

Trench foot was a case in point. Most commonly caused by having stood for days on end without being able to remove wet socks and boots, trench foot was used as an index of morale by the authorities. In four years of trench warfare some 74,711 men were admitted to hospitals with trench foot and other related ailments, such as frost-bite. Trench foot became such a problem as to be treated as a crime. Each new case had to be brought to the attention of commanding officers, who judged the cause to be accidental, intentional or the result of negligence.¹ In the winter of 1915, strict guidelines were laid down for its prevention. Feet were to be kept as clean as possible - 'washed in water not warm but with the chill just taken off, well dried and rubbed with anti-frostbite grease (typically whale fat). Officers and NCOs were expected to be especially vigilant in the prevention of trench foot - periodically issuing troops with fresh socks and ensuring their men did not tie their boots and puttees too tightly. NCOs were even sent on courses on how to massage feet and remedy frost-bite.²

Throughout the war discipline remained the foundation of good morale, but the physical demands of trench warfare proved a moral ordeal against which discipline could provide only partial insurance. War, in the words of one veteran, was 'a matter of fasting and thirsting; of toiling and waking; of lacking and enduring'.³ The soldier's basic material needs had to be met for morale to remain stable. Those needs were not excessively great. The material poverty and physical hardship of life in the trenches came as a massive shock to young recruits from sheltered middle-class backgrounds with scant experience of struggle and discomfort. But for the working-class recruit the hardships of army life were not wholly dissimilar to those he had left behind. Civilian life for most of Edwardian Britain's workers

¹ Brent Wilson, 'Morale and Discipline', pp. 32, 34, 189.

² 9th Division war diary, Sept./Oct., 1915, WO 95/1744, PRO; A. R. Buxton, *The Rifle Brigade*, London, 1918, p. 137.

³ Quoted in C. Douie, *The Weary Road*, Stevenage, 1988, p. 78.

was squalid, brutish and short. Accustomed to long hours in the workplace and conditions of poverty at home, the working-class recruit was in many respects well rehearsed for what greeted him in France.¹ As civilians, the working-class was prepared to put up with hardship so long as its relatively low expectations were met: 'Beer, betting, a bed, a daily hot meal, football to play and with a team to support' were the basic requirements of most urban workers.² Wyn Griffith quickly discovered that the ordinary soldier measured life 'on a scale of comfort and not according to the possibility of its extinction'.³ Recognising that it was the necessities of life which remained the principal preoccupation of the working-class volunteer, the army devoted its energies to providing a vast network of welfare facilities (described by one historian as a 'bureaucracy of paternalism') behind the lines, that included YMCA and Church Army huts and canteens as well as sports pitches, concert parties, cinemas, and even excursions.⁴

Inevitably, the trench environment placed a strain on this 'bureaucracy' and many of the luxuries of the rear were forsaken in the move up the line.⁵ Food featured high on the soldier's list of basic needs yet, both in quantity and quality, the food provided by the military authorities at the front was generally regarded as poor. Out of the line troops did not have to subsist solely on army rations. By late 1915, most rest camps had a battalion canteen or YMCA hut where men could buy basic groceries; alternatively, they could supplement their rations with a meal at one of the many local *estaminets*. Food in the trenches, however, was a different matter. Until late 1915, when the authorities began to move army field-kitchens further up the line, troops occupying the front-line trenches had to subsist on a meagre diet of bread, biscuits and bully beef. The advent of field kitchens improved matters, but provided no surety of hot food to units stranded in difficult terrain or cut off by enemy fire. The poor

¹ C. Barnett, 'A Military Historian's View of the Great War', *Essays by Divers Hands*, Royal Society of Literature, 1970, p. 10.

² Liddle, 'British Soldier on the Somme', p. 8.

³ Griffith, *Up to Mametz*, p. 26.

⁴ G. Sheffield, 'Officer-Man Relations, Discipline and Morale in the British Army of the Great War', in H. Cecil and P. H. Liddle (eds.), *Facing Armageddon: the First World War Experienced*, London, 1996, p. 415.

⁵ 5th army war diary, March 1917.

quality of the food undoubtedly affected morale, especially when it was seen to be the result of profiteering by unscrupulous companies back home. Frank Richards wrote ruefully of a particular brand of the *Maconochie-type* tinned stews: ‘The head of that firm should have been put up against the wall and shot for the way they sharked us troops.’¹ In 1917, food was reported to the War Cabinet as one of the principal causes of troop discontent.²

A subject of scorn for the British soldier, the poor quality of army food nevertheless paled alongside the effects of the weather. In addition to the struggle with the Germans, the front-line soldier waged an almost continuous war against the elements. Men who had volunteered and trained through the warm summer months of 1914 were confronted with a terribly cold first winter. To make matters worse, the military authorities were materially ill prepared to deal with the harsh climatic conditions: clothing and equipment were in critically short supply, forcing men to improvise as best they could. There is evidence that morale was again dented during the second winter of the war, whilst the winter of 1916/17 was particularly severe with frostbite widespread and men freezing to death at their posts.³ Some troops ranked the effects of winter alongside combat. One man wondered how the youngest recruits stood up to weather conditions ‘cruel enough to make a wreck of the strongest man’.⁴ The rain added its ravages to those of the cold. Indeed, although freezing cold would lower the morale of some men, it was the rain that caused the most widespread and chronic misery. In 1917, Flanders saw almost continuous rainfall between the end of July and the beginning of September, the consequences of which were appalling. The wretchedness of being almost permanently soaked through to the skin caused spirits to ebb, as did the impossibility of coping with the secondary misery of the mud that accompanied a downpour. The trenches were frequently ankle-deep in it, but it was not uncommon to see men struggling, up to their waists in black slime. The most horrible consequence of the mud was that men, encumbered by their equipment, actually drowned in it, sometimes in the trenches themselves, but more

¹ Richards, *Old Soldiers*, p. 67.

² Fuller, *Troop Morale*, p. 61.

³ Handley, written account, p. 49.

⁴ Hindle, diary, privately held, p. 5.

often when falling into a shell-hole; their cries for help unheard in the incessant noise of shellfire.

The damage done to morale by the elements was not permanent, however. Spirits that had been dampened by wet weather would soon recover once the rain stopped. 'It seems a treat to be alive now it's fine after our terrible weather,' wrote one soldier, while even the perennially morose George Hindle was able to concede on one occasion that 'It is a lovely day, one of those which makes life worth living even in the war'.¹ Similarly, grievances over food proved to be spasmodic and there is little evidence to suggest that the poor quality of army food permanently eroded the military spirit of the British soldier. The mood of men would invariably be lifted by the arrival of fresh rations or a food parcel from home. C. P. Quayle appeared disaffected in the winter of 1914: 'Tell those itching to get out here they are fools', he wrote home. Yet a week and a full food ration later his spirits had risen: '...we now have bags of grub and are living like lords.'² The simple existential delight of a cooked breakfast was enough to raise the spirits of others: 'Sitting round the little stove watching the bacon sizzle and listening to the splutter of the eggs, at the same time sniffing the good aroma, produces a most pleasant feeling, a feeling that life out here with all its dangers and hardships has its bright side.'³ Few men were immune to the worst deprivations of the trenches, yet most endured providing they were given sustenance and allowed time to recover. As one veteran observed: 'Healthy young soldiers recover with remarkable rapidity from the most gruelling experiences when they have a good sleep and a square meal.'⁴

However adverse the circumstances, the army strove to provide its troops with a basic level of comfort in the front-line, and warm clothing, an adequate level of nutrition and a minimum level of shelter were generally guaranteed. It was the officer and NCO who between them ensured that those basic needs were met. Although it was the officer who was held directly responsible for the welfare of the men of his unit, it was the NCO who

¹ G. C. Gower (ed.), *The Diary and Letters of Corporal J. W. Gower*, London, 1994, p. 46; Hindle, diary, p. 9.

² C. P. Quayle, letters, 13.12.14, 17.12.14.

³ P. Fraser, diary 2-16 September, 1917, LULLC.

⁴ Terraine, *General Jack's Diary*, p. 152.

administered that welfare. Each rank of NCO had an essential part to play in the provision of welfare, but the grades of platoon sergeant and section corporal stand out as worthy of special attention. At its widest the focus of the soldier's life in the front line was the platoon, at its narrowest the section. Troops were moved up the line as part of their battalion but it was as platoons and sections that they were chiefly administered. Men lived, ate, slept, worked, trained and fought in the same platoons and sections, some of which changed little, if at all, between the day of their first formation and the day on which they first suffered casualties in France.¹ A. J. Abraham recalled that he and his comrades 'existed in a little world of our own' in and out of line... in rear never going far from billet and canteen'.² The soldier's physical confinement to the platoon in turn shaped his mental horizons. Men were comparatively well informed of the larger events and the direction the war was taking.³ But since operations were on a relatively small scale, troops, paradoxically, remained largely ignorant of the activities of other units in their own immediate theatre of war.⁴ Men had a vague sense of a larger brotherhood but their allegiance lay first and foremost to their immediate comrades and the units in which their whole lives were now immersed.⁵ The platoon, in the words of one veteran, created a 'sense of being a community within a community, which intensifies the very meaning of comradeship'.⁶

Between them the platoon sergeant and section corporals were involved in almost every aspect of the material and, indeed, emotional welfare, of the sixty men of their platoon. Platoon sergeants and section leaders were held accountable for the whereabouts and conduct of every member of their units. They woke their men in the morning and set them to bed at the correct time; allotted them their work and duties and identified those troops who were ill,

¹ Maxse, *Hints on Training*, p. 9; Major E. Kirkpatrick, *The Training Of An Infantry Company*, Aidershot, 1913, p. 16.

² Abraham, memoir, p. 45.

³ Shepherd, *Sergeant Major's War*, p. 45.

⁴ Hiscock, *Bells of Hell*, p. 42. Such narrow horizons may have helped to conserve morale at some stages of the war, cocooning men from news of setbacks experienced by other units. Capt. E. V. Tempest, *History of the Sixth Battalion West Yorkshire Regiment, Vol. I/6^h Battalion*, Bradford, 1921, p. 205.

⁵ L. Janis, 'Group Identification Under Conditions of External Danger', *British Journal of Medical Psychology*, 36, 1963, p. 227.

⁶ Griffith, 'Pattern of One Man's Remembering', p. 287.

on leave or absent from duty without good reason; chastised their men for their indolence and their insolence, extended praise where it was deserved, heard their complaints and calmed their tempers; they trained their men formally on the drill-square but also imparted tips on uniform and the correct way of saluting - the kind of casual but essential 'parental' advice that would enable the recruit, like the child attending its first day of school, to cope with his new environment and keep out of trouble.

Platoon and section leaders were duty bound to place the material needs of their men before their own. Cold and exhausted after a night's marching, NCOs saw to it that their charges were billeted and bedded down, blankets found for them and food readied before attending to their own needs. Any NCO who failed to secure adequate shelter for his men was liable to be placed under arrest.¹ The NCO, as well as ensuring that the men of his unit were fed, watered and sheltered, also supervised their safety. He checked that each soldier was fully kitted out at all times: his equipment functional, his respirators at hand and ready for use in the advent of a gas attack, his ammunition, identification disc and iron rations intact for the venture across no-man's-land.² Nor did the NCO's obligation to his men cease with their deaths. The NCO was held responsible for keeping up to date the "AB 64" form which contained the soldier's home address and details of his next of kin, particulars which, in the advent of his death, would be forwarded to his company commander for a letter of condolence. It was not uncommon in fact for senior NCOs to take it upon themselves to pen a personal letter to the family of the deceased, adding flesh to the bare bones of the official letter.³

Numerous memoirs testify to the paternalism demonstrated by NCOs in the front line. Alfred Hale, a grade III man (men graded either I or II were eligible for overseas combat, whereas grade III men had 'marked physical disabilities' which precluded their direct participation in combat but still permitted them to serve in clerical units; grade IV men were

¹ Bartlett, memoir, p. 264.

² B. C. Lake, *Knowledge for War - Every Officer's Handbook for the Front*, London, n.d., p. 149; "Tallow", *Hints to Non-Commissioned Officers on Active Service*, Aidershot, 1918, pp. 17-19.

³ "Tallow", *Hints to NCOs*, pp. 18-19; P. Glynn, *All That We Had, We Gave. The Story Of The Denbigh Territorials August 1914 - September 1915*, Denbeigh, 1999, p. 57; Milner, *Leeds pals*, 149.

unfit to serve in any capacity) of the most unmilitary disposition who was sent to France in the penultimate month of the war, received nothing but consideration from a Sergeant Cassidy who, though impatient with Hale's unworldliness, nevertheless 'fathered and protected' Hale and looked after him 'in every way possible'.¹ New drafts arriving at their battalion in France were always welcomed into the fold by a senior NCO. Riddell recalled that his sergeant major always met new recruits in person, greeting them with a reassuring pep talk, urging them not to be afraid since he was there to look after them; a gesture, wrote Riddell, that 'used to inspire confidence in themselves (*sic*) and me too'.² Max Plowman, too, recorded that his senior NCO always went easy on the youngest members of a new draft, cushioning the transition from training to active service by allotting them the easiest jobs.³ Perhaps the greatest aid to the morale of the private soldier was an inner feeling of security, the reduction of fear born out of the confidence of knowing that he was being looked after and looked out for by those in authority.⁴ Be it the temporary relief of the rifle or pack of a new or sick recruit straggling on the march, acts of thoughtfulness by an NCO, though apparently minor, revealed an interest in the welfare of his men and made them feel valued.⁵ Aware he was ill and not up to a day of intensive marching, A. J. Abraham's sergeant allowed him to go up the line in advance of the rest of his unit at his own pace and settle in a day early, an apparently common sense course of action but one which the author thought sufficiently generous to comment upon many years later.⁶

Interestingly, of those memoirs which testify to the paternalism of the NCO, many emphasise the explicitly 'maternal' role played by NCOs in the life of the platoon. Hale, who confessed to being regularly 'dry-nursed' by his sergeant, on a separate occasion had his tunic peremptorily buttoned up by a corporal. 'I felt,' recollected Hale, 'much as a small boy would

¹ P. Fussell (ed.), *The Ordeal of Alfred M. Hale*, London, 1975, p. 89; J. Winter, 'Army and Society' in *Nation in Arms*, p. 200.

² Riddell, memoir, p. 50.

³ "Mark VII", *Subaltern on the Somme*, p. 56.

⁴ S. A. Stouffer [and others], *The American Soldier*, Vol. 2, Princeton, 1949, p. 149.

⁵ Cordy, memoir, p. 18; H. H. Munro, *The Square Egg*, London, 1924 edn., p. 84.

⁶ Abraham, memoir, p. 75.

feel whose mother had taken his hat off for him on entering a church'.¹ Elsewhere, Victor Ricketts had a platoon sergeant who 'looked after us more like a mother'.² Certainly, the NCO was obliged to perform domestic chores which would have been wholly familiar to most every working-class housewife in Britain: brewing tea, securing new clothes and darning old, airing blankets to prevent lice, giving hair cuts.³ The insightful recollections of J. W. Riddell conjure up the amusing image of an anxious mother-hen busily shooing her straying brood. Riddell's memoir records, a touch indignantly, that his chief responsibilities before the start of a long march were to ensure that his men 'wash their feet...cut their nails.. .and see that they go to the lavatory'.⁴ The paucity of rations was a constant source of irritation for the NCO who, like the mother struggling to raise a family on a tight budget, had to find ways to stretch his unit's meagre allotment. Most NCOs succeeded in making a little go further: bread was sliced thinly and the rum ration watered. Some, however, appear to have lacked the housewife's guile for making ends meet. 'A loaf between ten,' despaired one veteran, '...they take me for a god-mother.'⁵

The 'maternal' role of the NCO reached its apotheosis in battle. Confined with his section to a shell-hole short of Glencorse Wood - scene of some of the fiercest fighting of the Third Battle of Ypres - an officer with the 2/4th London Battalion Royal Fusiliers tried in desperation to quieten a hysterical youngster whose sobbing was unnerving the rest of the men. Having tried to no avail to reason with him, the officer slapped the youth about the face. 'It had an extraordinary effect,' he recalled. 'There was absolute silence in the shell-hole and then the corporal, who was a much older man, said, "I think I can manage him now, sir." Well, he took that boy in his arms, just as if he was a small child, and when I crawled back a little later to see if all was well, they were both lying there asleep and the corporal still had his arms around the boy... At zero hour they went over together.'⁶ There to see their men off,

¹ Fussell, *Ordeal of Alfred M. Hale*, pp. 53, 141.

² Ricketts, memoir, p. 26.

³ Chapman, *Passionate Prodigality*, p. 23; "Tallow", *Hints to NCOs*, p. 18.

⁴ Riddell, memoir, p. 66.

⁵ Ricketts, memoir, p. 27.

⁶ Lt. A. Angel, 2/4th London Battalion, Royal Fusiliers, quoted in Macdonald, *Passchendaele*, p. 180.

NCOs left out of the attack were the first to welcome them back. Abraham recalled with fondness his quartermaster sergeant who was there to greet and tend to the troops returning from action, 'like a mother to us, guiding us to a place to lay down, bringing each of us tea to drink'.¹ A disciplinarian when needed, but also someone who satisfied the material and, to a large extent, the emotional needs of his charges, the NCO did indeed function as a surrogate mother to his men.

The efforts of many NCOs went beyond their official obligations in an attempt to ease the burden on their men. NCOs were not obliged to engage in manual labour, but many chose to do so, mucking in with the digging or repairing of trenches rather than just supervising the work detail.² One ranker observed of his corporal that 'he'd carry petrol cans of water four at a time, always doing heavy work if it meant aiding the men'.³ Some NCOs found ways to embellish the Spartan lives of their men. Examples of officers providing their men with additional luxuries out of their own pockets are well-documented.⁴ But expressions of personal largesse by NCOs were just as common and perhaps more notable, since the NCO had less to give away than the officer. John Lucy has left an affectionate portrait of a Sgt. Benson, successful at cards but too generous to keep hold of his profits, 'extremely kind hearted, dropping his winnings, ill-gotten or otherwise, into the hands of the private soldiers as he moved among them'.⁵ Another wrote of his NCOs handing out sweets to 'the poorer ones who can't afford much'.⁶ R. S. McFie, a quartermaster sergeant with the 1/10th (Scottish) Battalion King's Regiment, was more affluent than most NCOs. A small businessman in civilian life, McFie was kept well supplied by friends and business associates with invaluable food parcels; supplies which McFie invariably shared with the rest of his unit. On one occasion he received thirty boxes of luxury biscuits, which he distributed amongst his

¹ Abraham, memoir, pp. 106-7.

² Adams, *Nothing of Importance*, p. 62; Lane, memoir, p. 6.

³ Buxton, *Rifle Brigade*, pp. 57-8.

⁴ McIlwain, diary, p. 61.

⁵ Lucy, *Devil in the Drum*, p. 213.

⁶ Munro, *Square Egg*, p. 100.

company.¹ Such unprompted gestures, though ostensibly minor, were highly respected by the troops, who saw them as evidence of their NCO's willingness to place the needs of the unit ahead of his own.

It was not uncommon, too, for NCOs to actually connive with their men in an attempt to make life more endurable. Some turned a blind eye to 'scrounging', such as the pilfering of eggs and fuel from local farms. Lucy asked no questions of the provenance of a suckling pig, brought back from behind the lines by a notorious poacher; 'I had,' confessed Lucy, 'already acted much too often as unwilling accessory, before and after, to his undiscovered crimes.'² Other NCOs actively participated. The diary of Sgt. J. McIlwain, a reservist with the 2nd Connaught Rangers, is peppered with accounts of his 'sorties' into 'deserted' shops and houses, in search of 'some odd coppers' and 'a change of drawers'.³ Corporal Bill Turner of the 3rd Salford Pals ordered two of his men to keep a French shopkeeper talking while he slipped around the back of the premises and used his wire cutters, borrowed from army stores, to secure a sack of eggs.⁴ Few NCOs felt the need to justify their actions. Indeed, such 'extras' were seen as an entitlement, a tacitly recognised perk of the 'soldier's trade'. Officers, too, displayed few scruples when it came to enhancing the quality and efficiency of their unit. Looting from the enemy and civilians was officially forbidden but many officers sanctioned it. One officer wrote of his Officers' Mess sergeant: 'I can see him now during the retreat from Mons going into the fields alongside the road in search of turnips, carrots, onions and what not where with to flavour the officers' stew.'⁵ Some officers were even prepared to sanction the theft of supplies from other battalions and even companies of one's own battalion were viewed as fair game. An artillery officer recalled 'We were short of rope for our horselines; I simply told a sergeant and before the day was over he had a coil of rope fifty yards long.' R. T. Rees made full use of his sergeant's comprehensive knowledge of the

¹ Macdonald, *1915*, p. 394.

² Lucy, *Devil in the Drum*, p. 214.

³ J. McIlwain, diary, 96/29/1, IWM, pp. 13-21.

⁴ Stedman, *Salford Pals*, p. 74.

⁵ E. Wyrall, *The History of the Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry 1914-19*, London, 1932, p. 198.

location of all things martial and how to get them, despite the fact that the gas helmets, duck-boards and countless other finds came at the expense of a sister company.¹

Key to the morale of the private soldier was the feeling of security that came from knowing one's immediate superiors were up to the job. Post World War Two and Korea studies found that troops held in highest esteem those NCOs who knew their work and evidence suggests that this was much the case in the First World War.² The first few weeks of active service were in some respects the most dangerous time for the new recruit. The first of the Kitchener battalions to arrive in France had received less than a year's training. Moreover, they were ill-prepared for the peculiar demands and dangers of the trenches. The training manuals that circulated amongst the volunteer battalions back in England paid little heed to trench warfare, which was viewed by the authorities as a hiatus in the normal business of open warfare. Even with the growing realisation that the war would be one of attrition, there was no immediate and wholesale rush to adapt training manuals to the demands of the trenches.³ Consequently, new drafts were not immediately thrown into combat upon their arrival at the front, nor were they usually placed in a tough sector. Instead they were typically attached to a unit stationed in a relatively quiet stretch where they would have the chance to find their feet before being thrown into the fray. No sector was utterly devoid of danger, however, and novices had to be taught to quickly absorb the mundane but essential routine that was vital to the survival of the individual and the safety of the unit. Responsibility for the tutelage of new drafts fell almost wholly on the shoulders the NCO. It was the platoon sergeant who familiarised the new men with the demands and dangers of trench life, imparting advice on safety and drawing attention to the need to maintain a basic level of personal and trench hygiene in the front line. Given time to find their feet, new drafts would then be pushed up the line to the fringes of no-mans-land, where experienced platoon and

¹ R. T. Rees, quoted in A. Simpson, *Hot Blood and Cold Steel: Life and death in the trenches of the First World War*, London, 1993, p. 22. For further examples see Behrend, *Make Me a Soldier*, p. 56; A. G. Kingsmill, *The Silver Badge*, Ilfracombe, 1966, p. 48.

² Stouffer, *American Soldier*, Vol. 1, p. 405; P. Watson, *War On The Mind. The Military Uses and Abuses of Psychology*, Harmondsworth, 1980, p. 120.

³ "Two Officers of the Dorsetshire Regiment", *Recruit Training*, p. 80; Hall, *Kitchener's Mob*, p. 37.

section NCOs would acquaint them with the topography of their stretch of the line and furnish them with information about the enemy; all of which was designed to make the novice less apprehensive about the time when he would be forced to leave the trenches proper.¹

When the time finally came for a new unit to take its place in the front line, the mere presence of a seasoned NCO acted as a steadying influence. To the raw recruit with no experience of intense shellfire, the calming words of an experienced NCO might prove invaluable. Edmund Blunden recalled an indispensable corporal who was ‘for ever comforting those youngsters who were so numerous among us; even as the shrapnel burst low over the fire-bay he would be saying without altered tone, “don’t fret, lay still”, and such things’.² Elsewhere we find a private of the 1 /8th West Yorks noting his commanding officer’s recommendation that the NCOs and older men take special care of the young lads: ‘He wants us to walk among them and keep them at it and keep their spirits up for it quietens you down a bit the first time in action.’³ Having a man of experience by one’s side boosted the confidence of young, first-time combatants. ‘Sergeant McCormack was the greatest man on earth,’ wrote one soldier. ‘He got everybody as calm and collected as you could get. He said to me, ‘Now come alongside me and try and keep that bunch of boys alongside you. You stick close to me, as close as you can and you’ll be alright.’⁴ Coolness under pressure both steadied men and also rubbed off on them. George Coppard reflected that his corporal was a ‘cool customer... a natural leader’ whose ‘cold grey eyes did more than anything else to help me control my fears’ ,⁵

Acts of bravery by NCOs in the combat zone were commonplace. But, as typified by the corporal who calmly wrenched out the fuse of an unexploded *minenwerfer* bomb (a particularly destructive enemy mortar), saving his entire section from almost certain death, most were acts that owed less to reckless bravado than cool efficiency and the presence of

¹ Macdonald, *Somme*, p. 229.

² E. Blunden, *Undertones of War*, London, 1956, p. 73.

³ W. Binks, diary, 8.9.16, LULLC.

⁴ W. Morgan, 10/11th Bn Highland Light Infantry, in Macdonald, *Passchendaele*, p. 109.

⁵ Coppard, *Machine-gun*, p.37.

mind that comes from knowing one's job and carrying it out with the minimum of fuss.¹

Sergeant John Carmichael of the 9th North Staffordshires won a VC for smothering a hand-grenade with his steel helmet on Hill 60 in 1917. The price of saving the lives of his men was two badly shattered legs and an injured arm, but with the modesty that characterised his generation and the commitment to efficiency that characterised his rank, Carmichael later declared: 'There was no thought of bravery or anything like that. I was there with the men to do the job, and that's what mattered.'²

It would be wrong of course to view all NCOs as seasoned experts. Promotion to and through the non-commissioned ranks was often swift, especially following heavy casualties when it was not uncommon for lance corporals to be made sergeants.³ Young, newly-promoted NCOs frequently found themselves giving orders to subordinates much older than themselves and with far more experience. Len Lovell, a young corporal with the 6th Battalion King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry, confessed that he would have been lost had he not had the guidance and support of a private, 'a much older man than me, who really had looked after me like a father although I was his Section NCO.'⁴ The popular view that the Western Front was a graveyard reserved especially for junior-officers overshadows the fact that many units suffered disproportionately high casualty rates amongst their ranks of NCOs. Periods of intense combat depleted or even decimated the junior command structure of battalions. The attack on Wood Lane by a Birmingham Pals battalion on 14th July on Somme 1916 lasted no more than a few hours but resulted in the loss of twelve sergeants, five corporals and twenty-four lance corporals.⁵ Even periods of static trench warfare frequently produced high casualty figures, especially along an active stretch of the line. Although they saw no actual combat, the 2/8* Warwickshires suffered severe losses amongst their senior NCOs during a relatively brief but hazardous period of 'routine' trench warfare in the Neuve Chapelle sector in August

¹ E. Wyrall, *The History of the Second Division 1914-1918*, Vol. I, London, 1921, p. 235.

² Macdonald, *Passchendaele*, p. 174.

³ C. Carrington, *Soldier from the Wars*, p. 199; Behrend, *Make Me a Soldier*, p. 61; Hawke, *Private to Major*, p. 105; H. D. Dobbyn, Field service correspondence book, 89/21/1, IWM.

⁴ Macdonald, *Somme*, p. 268.

⁵ Carter, *Birmingham Pals*, p. 184.

1916.¹ In the course of the war, the four Hull Pals Battalions between them lost 2 warrant officers, 82 sergeants and lance sergeants and 194 corporals and lance corporals. Of the four, the worst hit was the 13th Battalion (East Yorkshire Regiment) for which 17% of its total losses were NCOs.²

Injury and sickness also drained units of their NCOs, and not just temporarily. NCOs were not guaranteed a return, once fit, to their original battalions. Instead they were often used to fill holes in other units. A 4th Army inquiry into the whereabouts of some several hundred NCOs who had not returned to their units since returning home on sick concluded that, of the 99.8% of men accounted for, some 38.1 % had returned overseas but to different units, 29.9 % had been deemed unfit for overseas duties, 12.7 % had been absorbed into reserve units awaiting return to France, 7.5 % had been discharged from the service, 5.4 % were under orders to proceed overseas, 5.2 % were 'hardening', whilst a further 1 % had been attached to schools of instruction.³ Even men whose minor injuries had warranted their being sent no further back than a casualty clearing station might, once discharged, find themselves absorbed by their battalion, division, or even corps HQ rather than returned to their unit in the field.⁴ Promotion, too, either by way of a senior non-commissioned posting to another company of the same battalion or a commission into another regiment, had the same consequence of removing the NCO from his original unit. Territorial units especially, with their large stock of middle-class recruits, lost many NCOs to commissions.⁵

The failure of the authorities to ensure NCOs a return to their own units was to some extent the result of the general expansion of the army, which placed huge administrative strain on an ill-prepared military bureaucracy. In the long run, however, men were ordered to different units as part of a deliberate strategy by the army, one designed in part to reduce the highly localised character of many units (the huge losses suffered by many of the 'Pals'

¹ H. T. Chidley, *Black Square Memories. An Account of the 2/8th Battalion The Royal Warwickshire Regiment 1914-1918*, Oxford, 1924, p. 40.

² Bilton, *Hull Pals*, pp. 230-234.

³ 4th army war diary, 17.3.17.

⁴ 5th army war diary, May 1917.

⁵ *The 5th Gloucester Gazette*, No. 8, Christmas 1915, p. 6.

battalions in the assaults of 1916 had highlighted the catastrophic effects on local communities of organising units on a narrow geographical basis), but in the main to allocate reinforcements to where they were most urgently needed. From August 1916, home-based regiments no longer continued to feed only their own units at the front. The army dispensed with separate training schemes for each part of the BEF - the regular army, the Territorials and the New Armies - in favour of a single, overall training scheme, labelled the 'Training Reserve'. Drafts were now recruited for general service rather than assigned to a particular regiment.¹ Veterans, recovered from their injuries but obliged to retrain before returning to France, were swallowed up in this common pool of manpower, a posting back to their parent outfit no longer certain.

The impact on units of the loss of an NCO was variable. NCOs were far more plentiful in number than officers. A full strength company in the field numbered one CSM and one CQM, four platoon sergeants and as many lance sergeants, and twelve corporals, of whom perhaps as many as a quarter would be of lance rank. Officers on the other hand were relatively scarce, a company of infantry typically having only either a major or captain at its head, with a further four subalterns each in charge of a platoon.² The loss of an NCO was therefore, on paper at least, more easily accommodated than the loss of an officer. A replacement NCO was, moreover, generally quick to be found. Whereas the loss of an officer would require a replacement from outside the unit, new NCOs were most often promoted from within a unit (in some cases, vacancies might be temporarily filled by experienced NCOs attached from companies of the same battalion, whilst experienced men on loan from other regiments might be made a permanent addition).³ Following the death or injury of an NCO, each existing NCO would move up a rank with the most junior grade of lance corporal filled by the promotion of a private.

¹ Hughes, 'The New Armies', pp. 113-4.

² Gale and Polden, *Notes for Commanding Officers*, Aidershot, 1917, p.302; K. C. Weldon, miscellaneous papers, 77/118/1, IWM.

³ Anon, *Scrap Book of the 7th Bn. Somerset Light Infantry*, Aylesbury, 1933, p. 24.

The loss to a unit of an NCO was less a matter of quantity than quality, however. The void left by any NCO, however junior his rank and limited his experience, had obvious implications for the command structure of a unit, but the death of a senior NCO was likely to be profoundly felt and might create a vacuum at the heart of a unit; one that was not easily filled. A key influence on the group cohesiveness of the platoon and section was the ability of the group to retain its original members, a detail apparently lost on the British High Command but recognised by Colonial corps who strove wherever possible to return injured troops back to their own units once fit.¹ Many sources testify to the comfort drawn from the sight of familiar figures of authority - even unpopular ones - with whom men identified permanence and a sense of security.² Few faces were more familiar than that of a senior NCO. He was a man who in all likelihood had been promoted from within his unit, had probably trained with the same unit prior to departure for France, had possibly enlisted as a private soldier with many of the same men over whom he now held rank; men, perhaps, with whom he even had civilian ties. In short, he was a figure of continuity, a man whose loss to his unit might be felt not simply in terms of efficiency — in his knowledge of the workings of his unit and the insight into his men - but personally.

Senior NCO casualties were inevitable but few units, if any, ever lost their entire component of senior NCOs for the simple reason that they were never all sent into action together. The army insisted that battalions leave a cadre of experienced men out of the attack as a nucleus around which the unit could be rebuilt in the event of heavy casualties. This explains why many units managed to come through the war with relatively few senior NCO casualties. The 4th Battalion of the Hull Pals for instance lost only two warrant officers in its three years of action.³ The number of NCOs held back varied, but typically comprised a pair

¹ A. L. George, 'Primary Groups, Organisation, and Military performance' in R. W. Little (ed.), *Handbook of Military Institutions*, Beverly Hills, California, 1971, pp. 303-4; D. Morton, 'The Canadian Military Experience in the First World War, 1914-18' in R. J. Q. Adams, *The Great War...Essays*, London, 1990, pp. 89-90.

² G. Stowell, *The History of Button Hill*, London, 1929, p. 328; E. Blunden, *Fall In, Ghosts: An Essay on a Battalion Reunion*, London, 1932, p. 12.

³ Bilton, *Hull Pals*, pp. 230-34.

each of CSMs, CQMSs, platoon sergeants and corporals from each battalion.¹ Between them, those NCOs kept out of the attack and those who survived it acted as a sustaining presence, passing on the 'culture' of the unit to new personnel. Evidence suggests, too, that the death of a pivotal figure such as a platoon sergeant, though keenly felt in the short term, did not necessarily lead to an erosion of the fabric of a unit. Within tight knit sections and platoons, the respect and admiration felt for a NCO did not end with his death. Instead, 'postponed obedience' had the opposite effect of 'markedly increasing adherence to all those group norms which were manifestly valued by the dead man'.²

As the war drew on, however, most battalions undoubtedly struggled to accommodate, both in terms of quantity and quality, the losses amongst their ranks of senior NCOs. By 1916, the army's manpower pool of fit and willing volunteers had all but run dry. It was hoped that the introduction of compulsory service would provide the numbers, but doubts persisted about the morale of a conscripted force. Conscription intensified the fears of the British military authorities, who believed that the drafting of potentially subversive trade-unionists would stretch discipline and erode the fabric of morale.³ The urgent demand for manpower after the battle of the Somme also meant that the Derbyites and conscripts of 1916 were less well trained than the Kitchener recruits who had taken to the field the previous year. Next to the nine months training received by the first New Army volunteers (by the end of 1915, the average length of training had been reduced to 12-14 weeks) and the eight received by the Territorial, the mere 18 weeks received by reinforcements to the 14th Birmingham Pals in the autumn of 1916 appears paltry.⁴ A year later, a batch of 700 new recruits sent to the 2nd Division in the spring of 1917, had enlisted only 2 months earlier and, unsurprisingly, there were few NCOs amongst their ranks capable of giving good instruction.⁵

¹ Johnston, memoir, p. 88.

² Janis, 'Group Identification', p. 232.

³ It would be but a short time before conscripts occupied a majority in the British Army. Between January 1916 and the end of the war some 2,504,183 men were conscripted *Statistics of Military Effort*, p. 354.

⁴ Beckett, 'The Territorial Force', p. 131; Carter, *Birmingham Pals*, p. 186.

⁵ E. Wyrall, *The History of the Second Division 1916-18*, Vol. II, London, n.d., p. 447.

Less well trained though the army's post-1916 intake was, it would be wrong to assume that a wholesale deterioration in quality accompanied the shift from volunteerism to compulsion. The notion that those men recruited after 1916 were a mix of the unwilling and the unfit is fallacious. The intake of the second half of the war included men who had not sought to evade the draft but instead, because of age or occupation, had been previously ineligible for service. Many of those called up under the Military Service Act of January 1916 had already attested their willingness to serve under Lord Derby's scheme and the figures for conscription disguise the fact that many freshly eligible eighteen year-olds would have volunteered anyway. Nor were all conscripts physically inferior to their volunteer counterparts. The Military Service Acts of 1917 and 1918 certainly combed out men previously deemed unfit for action and, in extending the upper age limit for conscripts from 41 to 50 (and even allowed for a further extension of the age limit to 56 if the need arose) thereby conscripted men of doubtful stamina. But the acts also modified the status of many men previously employed in protected industries, in the process freeing up young, fit men of A1 calibre. Victor Ricketts recalled the welcome given to a batch of conscripted miners withdrawn from the pits late in the war, fighting fit and 'keen and eager to give of their best'.¹ Elsewhere we find an officer with the 6th Northants writing as late as 1918 of the reinforcement of an 'awfully good draft... of 19 year olds...some of them are fine fellows'.² Age and occupation both had prevented some individuals from volunteering earlier. A. J. Abraham came of age in 1917 but his employment in a reserved occupation looked set to further thwart his ambition to enlist. The Military Service Act of April that year, however, gave him the opportunity and Abraham immediately volunteered and was accepted into the 8th Royal West Surrey Regiment. Abraham, who qualified as a first-class shot back home in training and soon made NCO, was as far removed as could be imagined from the stereotype of the older man harried into service against his will.³

¹ Ricketts, memoir, p. 248.

² C. Parry Okeden, letter, 14.2.18, 90/7/1,1WM.

³ Abraham, memoir, p.16.

Conscripts and Derbyites alike initially met with a degree of suspicion and hostility from volunteers and Regulars who branded them as shirkers.¹ There is evidence to suggest, too, that some senior NCOs were, by virtue perhaps of their relatively long service, especially disdainful of conscripts, who they viewed with a mix of moral contempt for their failure to volunteer and professional disdain at their - imagined or otherwise - poor quality. W. L. Andrews recalled that the NCOs in his unit always allotted the worst jobs to conscripted men, while Norman Gladden, a Derbyite with the 7th Northumberland Fusiliers, who arrived in France in August 1916, was greeted with contempt by his immediate superiors. Gladden had difficulty in obtaining his just rations, poor as they were, and was put on an impossible number of working parties 'from which the old hands honestly thought they had earned exemption'.² Gladden's move to a sister unit - the 11th Battalion - resulted in an altogether more positive experience, however. By then Gladden was a 'veteran', whose time in the front line and experience of combat had scratched away much of the tarnish of conscription.

Not all conscripted men met with a frosty reception. Indeed, reinforcements of any description were generally welcomed by most units and a turnover of troops often had an invigorating effect on a depleted battalion.³ J. C. Dunn observed how easy it was to distinguish units with fresh recruits, untarnished by the blood of a long campaign: 'The amount of new blood in them made the difference. On the move newly-come units were easy to tell from those that have been out some months. The older lot crawl, the new march; the old plod along, mostly quietly and nervously, the new sing and whistle.'⁴ Following Passchendaele, Charles Carrington wrote that his decimated battalion was rejuvenated with new blood and 'within a few weeks was as good as ever'.⁵

Physical fitness and enthusiasm were only partial compensation for experience, however. As the war drew on, the number of replacement 'ready-made' NCOs quickly dried

¹ Anderson, *Unbreakable Coil*, p. 62.

² W. L. Andrews, *Haunting Years*, London, 1930, p. 229; N. Gladden, *Ypres 1917: a Personal Account*, London, 1967, pp. 16, 29.

³ Tempest, *Sixth Battalion West Yorkshire Regiment*, p. 281.

⁴ J. C. Dunn, *The War the Infantry Knew, 1914-1919*, London, 1987 edn. p. 160.

⁵ Carrington, *Soldier From the Wars*, p. 198.

up. Units in the field were sent drafts of inadequate depot men, 'soft on good living', to fill senior non-commissioned posts.¹ But the best replacement NCOs invariably came from within the same unit. Over time, heavy casualties depleted the pool of internal NCO candidates, forcing company commanders to be less than fastidious in their choice of NCOs. In extreme cases, being a survivor became the only qualification needed for a stripe.² Amongst those replacements who showed initial promise, many became casualties before they had been given time to find their feet as NCOs. But those who survived long enough soon became old hands - at least to the next batch of replacement recruits - imparting experience and wisdom to their future successors.³

4.2 The NCO and officer morale

It is perhaps easy to overlook the fact that it was not just the morale of the rank and file that proved vulnerable under the strain of war. Indeed, to a veteran of the First World War, a discussion of the 'issue' of officer morale would have been frankly anomalous. That an officer should be vulnerable to the same fluctuations in morale as the ranker was a notion that was simply not entertained. The officer occupied a position of responsibility and was thus duty bound to set an example of courage and resilience to his subordinates. The officer, moreover, possessed, by virtue of his breeding and schooling, the necessary moral fibre, or 'character', of which courage, unselfishness and devotion to duty were its outward expression and which steeled him against the morale sapping factors - lack of sleep, the vagaries of the weather, even the loss of a comrade - that so commonly afflicted the ranker. The officer could, therefore, be relied on at all times to carry out his duties. His morale, in short, was seen as axiomatic.⁴

¹ Johnston, memoir, p. 106; Shanahan, memoir, p. 36. This was not always the case: the Cambridgeshires, for instance, received a good batch of NCOs as late as September 1918. Brig. Gen. E. Riddell and Col. M. C. Clayton, *The Cambridgeshires 1914 to 1919*, Cambridge, 1934, p. 182.

² Johnston, memoir, p. 88.

³ Youth was not always inconsistent with experience. In March 1918, Lt. Col. R. W. F. Johnston, then a subaltern with the 16th Royal Scots, was 22 years old, his CSM was a year his senior and his company's platoon sergeants no older than 21 or 22. Despite their youth, they were all seasoned veterans, several times over the top. Johnston, memoir, p. 93.

⁴ G. Roussey and J. L' Hermitte, *The Psychoneuroses of War*, London, 1917, p. 155.

A public school education, with its Spartan living conditions, long hours of work, harsh discipline and strict hierarchy, certainly represented something of a foundation course in army life. But there was little that a public school education could offer in the way of adequate preparation for the hardships and squalor of trench warfare, and a newly commissioned officer with little or no experience of the front line but with the burden of leadership to carry, might find the demands of his job impossibly heavy.¹ Indeed, there was an irony in the army's expectation that officers exhibit paternalism towards their men, since not infrequently it was the officer who was more in need of care than his men, the latter more inured to a life of civilian hardship and early death than he. Charles Bowra confessed that 'paternal care meant very little, for though it was my task to look after my men, it was usually they who looked after me, and were more capable of dealing with a sudden crisis than I was'.² Elsewhere, 2nd Lieutenant W. Cushing, newly commissioned into the 9th Norfolks, observed that he was 'expected not merely to bellow commands on parade, but to know how to feed, clothe and billet sixty men, know all their names and characters...attend to their wants, be responsible for their efficiency....and also lead them through the discomforts and dangers of trench warfare. My training fitted me for none of these things'.³

The newly commissioned temporary officer faced a steep learning curve at the front, one which nevertheless had to be quickly negotiated. Unlike the peacetime officer, whose introduction to his commission was a gentle one, guided along the way by experienced fellow officers able and willing to share their experience and wisdom, the New Army subaltern was very much thrown in at the deep end. Any real guidance he did receive came from the indispensable pocket manual *'Notes for Officers'* and his new unit's senior NCO. Like the private soldier, the officer needed an introduction to the rudiments of health and safety in the front line and it was a senior NCO, typically a platoon or company sergeant, whose responsibility it was to shepherd the new officer through his first few weeks in the line. The

¹ R. Wilkinson, *The Prefects*, London, 1964, *passim*. For a stark portrait of one sheltered middle-class youth's introduction to life in France, see B. Willey, 'A Schoolboy in the War', in Panichas, *Promise of Greatness*, p. 323.

² C. M. Bowra, *Memories 1898-1939*, London, 1966, p. 91.

³ Quoted in Macdonald, *1915*, p. 161.

NCO not only imparted the basic practical guidance on routine and procedure so necessary for survival in the trenches, but also passed on numerous indispensable tips such as the varying sounds made by different types of enemy shell or the stretches of trench most vulnerable to enemy sniper fire.¹

For his part, the NCO had to be wary not to compromise the as yet still fragile status of the new officer. The NCO was there not to take charge but instead to shadow his officer and offer discreet, benign tutelage, 'accepting with unperturbed discipline the inevitable rawness of the new officer, and standing always at his side to help and explain'.² There perhaps existed some resentment from seasoned NCOs who suddenly after a year or more of the war found themselves under the command of a freshman and, undoubtedly, some believed themselves quite capable of running a unit without interference from an officer.³ Wyn Griffith recalled with wry affection his worldly wise sergeant major, a man reluctant to suffer fools gladly and fully aware of just who made the army tick. 'His face,' wrote Griffith, 'showed plainly his amused tolerance of the idiosyncrasies of impetuous or lethargic subalterns, and I felt that in his thinking there were but two men in the company not entirely bereft of common sense, and that I was the second.'⁴ Officers who had served as NCOs knew the dynamic from both angles, which might save them from the indignation of having to call on an NCO for help.⁵ Nevertheless, though there were doubtless some NCOs who took advantage of their superior training and experience to highlight the military shortcomings of their officers, it is unlikely that many bore any real resentment and most recognised their own importance in the 'on the job' training of their new officers.⁶

Aside from helping the young officer to find his feet, the most obvious contribution the NCO could make to the upkeep of the morale of his officer was that he be efficient, carrying out his orders promptly and correctly and ensuring that his men do the same. The

¹ Stewart and Sheen, *Tyneside Scottish*, p. 125; R. Gale, *Call to arms*, London, 1968, p.15; Packham, memoir, p. 23.

² "An Officer" (J.M. Mitchell), *The New Army in the Making*, London, 1915, p. 66.

³ Campbell, *Cannon's Mouth*, p. 24; Andrews, *Haunting years*, p. 261.

⁴ Griffith, *Up to Mametz*, p. 135.

⁵ Nash, *Diary of an Unprofessional Soldier*, p. 29.

⁶ Bowra, *Memories*, p. 80; Bilton, *Hull Pals*, p. 29.

smooth running of a unit was dependent to a large degree on the efforts of its senior NCOs, and an efficiently run unit was invariably one in which an officer had delegated a considerable degree of authority and responsibility to his platoon sergeant. To have a senior NCO who could be relied on to think for himself and use his own initiative was a godsend to an officer.

Essential to the smooth running of the unit, and in turn the morale of the unit's officer, was the knowledge and insight that a seasoned NCO possessed of his unit. As we have seen, the rigid segregation of the ranks which characterised the pre-war army was somewhat relaxed in the battalions of the New Armies. Nevertheless, though many officers made an effort to speak to and get to know their men, in the ordinary course of daily rounds it was the NCO who still had by far the fullest contact with the rank and file. The NCO was, what is more, invariably promoted from within his own unit. He shared a common history with his men, one begun with enlistment but in some cases with its roots in the civilian workplace or school. Cut from the same cloth, the NCO possessed an intrinsic knowledge of his comrades. His shared social background, continuity of service and the nature of his duties combined to afford the NCO a profound insight into the psychological and emotional lives of his men; the practical value of which was considerable. The NCO acted as the army's eyes and ears. He was a detector of devilry who knew the dodges and scams of the working class ranker: the supreme example of 'the poacher turned gamekeeper'. 'By a word,' wrote one senior NCO of his platoon, 'I can hold them in check when they get unruly because I know them and their East End spirit.'¹ The platoon sergeant who took care to know his men, who learned their prejudices and habits and identified their individual strengths and weaknesses, was able to identify which of his men could be relied on in an emergency and who to keep a

¹ Young, diary, 5.5.17. The same social class was not, however, a prerequisite for gaining insight. The civilian world of Sgt. Major F. H. Keeling would have been a remote one to most of the men under him. Yet Keeling, a former Wykehamist, who three times declined a commission, not from lack of ambition nor a fear of inadequacy but out of a sense of duty to his unit, still managed to forge close bonds with and gain the confidence of many of his working-class charges. Townshend, *Keeling Letters*, p. 212.

watchful eye on.¹ Although a good officer would do his best to monitor the morale of his men, it was the NCO who was best positioned to detect changes in mood and recognise the first signals of distress. The attentive NCO was quick to spot and address the silence in a normally cheerful individual on the eve of battle or the diligent soldier whose work became slipshod following a piece of bad news from home.²

From the officer's point of view, the greatest practical application of the NCO's close physical and emotional proximity to the ranker was the insight it gave him into the collective mood of his unit; first-hand information which would be difficult for an officer to otherwise ascertain and which might prove vital in detecting potential unrest.³ An NCO could distinguish the innocuous - some would argue essential - grouching that accompanied a decline in the weather or the late arrival of mail from home from the simmering, potentially mutinous tension that followed a tactless order from above.⁴ As punishment for a poor inspection, A. Reeve's unit received word that its cigarette ration had been cancelled and its letters home threatened with increased censorship. Reeve's diary records that, such was the ill-feeling amongst the men, that had it not been for the incisive action of the company's sergeant major, a mutiny would have been likely. The disgruntled ringleaders marched to see the colonel, but the senior NCO succeeded in intercepting and conciliating them with the promise that he would pass on their grievances to the commanding officer. The following day the order was retracted.⁵ Elsewhere, following repeated losses on the Somme, Sergeant Munday of the 1 /5th Battalion, London Regiment (London Rifle Brigade), approached his commanding officer with serious concerns for the morale of the battalion. Upon Munday's

¹ Kentish, *Maxims*, p. 2.

² Townshend, *Keeling Letters*, p. 250.

³ W. Korpi, 'A Note on the Ability of Military Leaders to Assess Opinions in their units', *Acta Sociologica*, 8, 1965, p. 293; Anon, 'Informal Social Organisation in the Army', *The American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 51, 1945-6, pp. 368. That NCOs knew more about their men than did their officers is underlined by the fact that a private soldier's suitability for promotion invariably depended on the recommendation or validation of his NCO. Even a man's suitability for a commission might hinge on the reference of a senior NCO as an accurate assessment of a candidate's respective potential and shortcomings. Lintott, letter, 12.1.15, 88/86/1, IWM; Tallow, *Hints to NCOs*, p.16.

⁴ Grouching was often tolerated by NCOs, who recognised it as a safety valve allowing men the opportunity for plain-speaking about the war. Mavrojani, *My Sergeant Major*, p. 5; Coppard, *Machine-gun*, p. 47.

⁵ A. Reeve, diary, 26.9.14, 90/21/1, IWM.

recommendation, the CO ordered a battalion parade in an attempt to diffuse a volatile situation. Munday's prompt action checked the growing discontent of his unit.¹ Both incidents illustrate neatly the fact that the best NCOs had 'a finger on the pulse' of their units.

The commanding officers of Sergeant Munday and Reeve's sergeant major had implicit faith in the sound judgement of their senior NCOs and showed no hesitation in acting upon their advice. But, of course, not all units were as fortunate to possess such good quality NCOs. Many battalions included men who failed to come up to scratch, often through no fault of their own. J. W. Riddell wrote of a former private who as a result of high casualties was promoted out of turn; the 'few stripes thrown on him' failing to disguise his incompetence.² Upon joining his new unit in France, Edwin Vaughan discovered many of his NCOs to be indifferent and lackadaisical and the men as a consequence undisciplined and slovenly.

An NCO who could not be trusted to maintain a basic level of discipline and efficiency and who failed to set a good example to his men was worse than useless. One peacetime officer observed that 'If any officer be in the position of having non-commissioned officers under him who are not perfectly trustworthy, he is likely to find himself in a very uncomfortable predicament'.³ An incompetent NCO in peacetime would invariably have his shortcomings magnified by war, his inadequacies creating an additional burden for the already overstretched officer to shoulder. G. A. Burgoyne, a veteran of the Boer War and a company commander with the 2nd Royal Irish Rifles, found that the inadequacy of his reservist NCOs obliged him to regularly intervene in the day-to-day running of his unit.⁴

However, a far greater number of memoirs testify to the respect and admiration felt by officers for their NCOs. One officer wrote with pride of an NCO who was 'one of the bravest and best gentlemen I have ever met... utterly invaluable... I have more respect for

¹ K. W. Mitchinson, *Gentlemen and Officers: The Impact and Experience of War on a Territorial Regiment, 1914-1918*, IWM, 1995, p. 170.

² Riddell, memoir, p. 59.

³ Cpt. J. F. Daniell, 'Discipline: Its importance to an armed force', *Journal of the Royal United Services Institute*, Vol. XXX III, 1889, p. 316.

⁴ Davison, *Burgoyne Diaries*, pp. 24, 33.

this man than for any other dozen I have met.¹ Similarly, we find a major with the 1st Somerset Light Infantry recalling with equal fondness a Sgt. Bonning, ‘one of those men who can always joke and laugh no matter how adverse conditions are from the elements, physical exhaustion, hunger and thirst or danger and with no immediate prospect of these conditions being alleviated’. Bonning’s courage was no less than his stoical humour. At Ploegsteert Wood, Bonning, himself shot in the arm, brought in two wounded men on separate occasions, the second time suffering a further wound to the leg. Just as he reached his trench a third and fatal bullet struck him in the head.² Professional respect and admiration not infrequently developed into friendship, rendering superficial - albeit temporarily - distinctions of class and rank; close friendships forged in war that, in some cases, would endure into peacetime.³

4.3 NCO morale

The morale of the NCO, like that of the officer, was largely taken as given. The man promoted from the ranks had by definition proved himself the best of his kind: well disciplined, of strong moral fibre and cool and courageous under fire. There to set an example of courage and resilience to their men, NCOs were nevertheless not invincible and even the most battle-hardened of senior NCOs, men who had earned their rank through acts of bravery, were not immune to breakdown. One commentator remembered a shell burst which did for one of the most courageous of regular NCOs, a man who, ‘seemed proof against all the accidents of life, he stood in the Company like a rock; men were swept up to him and eddied round him for a little time and ebbed away again, but he remained’.⁴ Others, even regular NCOs, resorted to extreme measures - acts of self mutilation in some instances - to secure a release from the firing line.⁵ More routinely, the NCO was vulnerable to the same morale sapping factors that afflicted the private soldier. Short-term fluctuations in the weather, delays

¹ R. L. Mackay diary, 2.8.17, LULLC.

² E. A. Packe, memoir, p. 16, LULLC; A. L. K. Anderson, *The Unbreakable Coil*, Wolverhampton, n.d., p. 35; Anon, *Scrap Book of the 7th Bn. Somerset Light Infantry*, Aylesbury, 1933, p. 29.

³ Griffith, *Up to Mametz*, pp. 135-6; see also E. Living, ‘Battle: An Infantry Subaltern’s Impressions’, *Blackwoods*, vol. 202, 1917, p. 717. Brigadier R. C. Foot, memoir, 86/57/1, IWM, p. 125.

⁴ Moran, *Anatomy of Courage*, p. 17; see also Gladden, *Ypres*, p. 145.

⁵ Cubbon, letters, 19.9.14, 15.10.14; Rixon, diary, 1.4.15, 19.8.15.

in the delivery of mail, the poor quality of food: all might temporarily darken his mood. Over time, too, the NCO fell victim to the same war-weariness that had, by late 1917, contaminated the ranks. E. J. Leed has suggested that by then ‘the professionalism of the common soldier, his willingness to dodge odious duties, his repudiation of anything that smacked of self-sacrifice, became paradigmatic’.¹ The testimony of Bert Chaney bears witness to this. A regular NCO, Chaney lost confidence in his superiors following the Somme offensive and resigned himself to doing ‘no more than was really necessary, following orders but if possible keeping out of harm’s way’.² By 1918, the British Army on the Western Front was short of adequate reinforcements and increasingly having to make do with the too-young and the unfit. ‘The senior NCOs,’ one officer wrote, ‘had long ceased to complain of slackness, they...shared in it.’³

As well as the negative influences on morale common to all ranks, there were difficulties peculiar to the non-commissioned rank. Seasoned NCOs especially might be prone to what one scholar has identified as ‘Old Sergeant’ syndrome. Typically a condition which manifested itself in an extreme emotional and psychological fatigue, ‘Old Sergeant’ syndrome was the consequence, paradoxically, of having survived too long. Although casualty rates amongst NCOs generally fell in line with those of other ranks, units would strive to preserve their veteran senior NCOs. Battalions would invariably leave a handful of experienced senior NCOs out of an attack to serve as a nucleus around which a new unit could be built. This policy, combined with the fact that the senior NCO was also likely to have been promoted from within his unit, made him, not infrequently, the most longstanding member of his unit. In terms of experience, the senior NCO’s value to his unit was, needless to say, considerable. But it was experience that might be bought at a personal cost to the NCO. Having survived the longest, he had witnessed the deaths of comrades, many of whom he would have

¹ E. J. Leed, ‘Class and Disillusionment in World War One’, *Journal of Modern History*, 50, Dec. 1978, p. 689. An assessment of the morale of front line troops based on the reports of the official censor of correspondence from the front concluded that the ‘old active enthusiasm is to some extent being replaced by passive acceptance.’ M. Hardie papers, 84/46/1, IWM, 1917, p. 3

² Quoted in Englander and Osborne, ‘Jack, Tommy, and Henry Dubb’, p. 598.

³ Dunn, *War the Infantry Knew*, p. 491.

numbered as friends; men who he had shepherded as new drafts, had trained and mentored and forged close relations with, only to see them perish. They were men who would, of course, be replaced with new blood. But therein lay the problem. With each new draft of replacement the process of shepherding and training began again and with it the prospect of more deaths. Over time, the veteran NCO became resistant to making close associations with new drafts for fear of losing them. The NCO's reluctance to form close associations in turn left him isolated from the rest of his unit and with few close associates in whom to confide and look to for succour.¹

The significance of the 'Old Sergeant' syndrome is, however, questionable. His responsibilities and obligation to his men, it might be argued, left the NCO with little opportunity for introspection. The historian John Baynes has written that 'Even a Corporal with a small section is taken out of himself and his worries in looking after his subordinates.'² Seconds before an attack, one NCO confessed that 'If ever a fellow was afraid, absolutely frightened to death, it was this child'. But his obligation to his men smothered his self-doubt and fear for his own safety: '...then the instinct of the leader, or one whose place it is to lead, came to the top and I became as cool and steady as a rock.'³ For those NCOs who were unburdened with the same sense of moral obligation to their men, there were other ways of coping with death. Some NCOs framed the deaths of their men within a phlegmatic acceptance of fate, while for others the imminence of death meant few were inclined to think beyond the daily struggle for survival. Sheer bloody-mindedness was as effective a defence mechanism as any. As conditions got worse and the death toll rose, men - perhaps in the main out of a duty to their lost comrades - grew more determined than ever to see out the war to the end. One NCO, writing in 1915, found life in France a 'rotten existence', yet at the same time remarked that 'of course we all make the best of it...'⁴ Some NCOs managed to diffuse the worst of the horrors with sardonic humour. Death had to be 'brought to earth and robbed of its

¹ R. Sobel, 'The "Old Sergeant" Syndrome', *Psychiatry*, 10, 1947, pp. 315-316.

² Baynes, *Morale*, p. 99.

³ D. L. Rowlands, letter, 5.2.18., IWM.

⁴ L. Cpl. C. Turner, 1st /1st West Riding Field Ambulance RAMC, letter, 13.6.15, LULLC.

disturbing influence, by rough gibes and the touch of ridicule. If it was firmly grasped like a nettle soon there was no sting left in it'.¹ Most were doubtless too concerned with their own survival to dwell on the fate of others. One NCO commented that, 'I had seen men killed and badly wounded with little feeling of sorrow, so preoccupied was I with my own apprehensions of what would happen next'.² Some viewed each death other than their own as a reaffirmation of their own invincibility, though for others every new death brought with it the increased likelihood that the next bullet had their name on it.

Another factor contributing to the emotional burden on the NCO stemmed from the peculiar dual responsibility of his role. As the main link between officer and ranker, the NCO operated with a 'foot in both camps'. Aside from the obvious workload associated with the NCO's twin responsibilities, for most NCOs this raised few problems. For a minority of NCOs, however, it served to create something of a conflict of interests. The NCO's principal duty was to his officer, to whom he was expected to display unwavering loyalty at all times. But the sentiments of many NCOs lay with their men. The commanding officer of Sergeant Major A. V. Young was not loved by his men. The day that its commanding officer was presented with a medal for gallantry, Young's company refused to respond to a staff officer's call for three cheers, despite being fully aware that they would be charged with misconduct. Young's professionalism prohibited any external show of approval, but his diary bears witness to the fact that he believed their actions to be justified.³ The NCO saw the war as the ranker saw it and, like the ranker, he viewed with incredulity many of the orders that were passed down from above. Ernest Shepherd sympathised with his men for the endless fatigues they were forced to perform: 'Apparently the authorities will get the very last ounce out of us. They can have mine, but the men complain a good deal'. Yet he recognised that it was his duty to maintain discipline: 'I have to stifle my opinion and rebuke them', he wrote.⁴ Riddell recalled the occasion his men withdrew from the front line. Struggling in protective thigh

¹ Moran, *Anatomy of Courage*, p. 118.

² McIlwain, diary, p. 32.

³ Young, diary, 2.11.16.

⁴ Shepherd, *Sergeant Major's War*, p. 50.

boots caked in mud, the troops were promptly ordered to left right march by an insensitive officer; an instruction Riddell saw it as tactless and an act of bad leadership.¹

Another potential difficulty for the NCO, especially the newly promoted one, was in adjusting to the new relationship with his men. The dilemma of giving orders to former friends that had dissuaded many soldiers from taking a stripe in peacetime remained a deterrent to promotion in war. The NCO who took up the challenge had to quickly learn how to strike a delicate balance between being part of the 'team' and remaining slightly aloof from it. Not all found it straightforward. As the evidence of a court martial reveals, some NCOs proved a little too eager to sever their umbilicus to the ranks. A private who had appealed against his sentence of Field Punishment for refusing to obey the order of a corporal had his sentence quashed. The hearing found that the corporal had only recently been promoted. He and the private had been friends in the ranks and the two had 'failed to adjust the old relationship to the new conditions, and the corporal, being proud of his dignity, asserted his authority rather heavily'.² More often than not, however, new NCOs tended to be too relaxed with their men especially in Kitchener and Territorial units with their fair share of troops who had enlisted together as friends or workmates in civilian life.³ NCOs not infrequently found themselves placed in the awkward position of having to give orders to men who had been their bosses in civilian life. Observed one officer: 'Orders were given in a conversational tone, almost as if asking a favour... When I checked an NCO for this and for seeming to be too familiar with some of his men, he said he had to be careful because one of the men in civil life was his foreman.'⁴

The most common threat to the morale of the NCO was less immediately psychological than physical. Accountable as he was both for the ranker and to the officer, the NCO was a man who was constantly looked to in need and who often bore the blame when things went wrong. He consequently had a heavy workload to endure. Despite the popular

¹ Riddell, memoir, p. 63.

² "Mark VII", *Subaltern on the Somme*, p. 135

³ Andrews, *Haunting Years*, p. 229; Stedman, *Salford Pals*, p. 97; Crutchley, *Machine Gunner*, p. 30.

⁴ Quoted in Macdonald, "1914-18", p. 197.

notion that it was the junior NCO who did all the running around, a senior NCO might find himself in the invidious position of having to do his own work and the work of his officer. Officer shortages in his battalion more than doubled Young's workload while Ernest Shepherd complained that: 'My work is incessant this time up, as not one of the officers had been under fire before, very few NCOs and few men...I had to carefully watch the new men, they are very shaky. I hope they will improve, it is a great strain on myself and the old NCOs left.'¹

The potentially morale-sapping factors associated with the non-commissioned rank were, however, offset by a number perks. The distinctions of social class that existed between rankers and officers were partially eroded at the front. Whatever their rank or class, all men who occupied a place in the front line were vulnerable to the same dangers and all were equal in the face of death. But the material poverty and physical hardship of life in the trenches was not equal for all.² Officers still continued to enjoy privileges not granted to their subordinates; privileges that helped to ease the physical and emotional hardships of trench life. Differences in the quantity and quality of food, drink and shelter served as the most accurate indicators of rank. More elaborate sleeping quarters, better quality rations, food parcels sent from home, more freedom of movement and a much greater frequency of leave: all served to reinforce the class divide that existed between officer and ranker.³ Behind the lines, the distinctions were even more pronounced. A subaltern with the Grenadier Guards could make a rather impatient request home for 'Devonshire cream...cheese cakes or pastry...and the like are all very useful'.⁴ The same man could grumble with moral impunity at the absence of furniture in his room, 'even when you are in Divisional Reserve'. Such ostentatious displays of privilege provoked a current of resentment amongst the ranks. F. H. Keeling felt deep indignation at not

¹ Young, diary, 25.4.17; Shepherd, *Sergeant Major's War*, pp. 47, 119. A veteran of World War Two estimated that a private soldier could last for two years of unrelieved operations before running serious risk of breakdown, whereas an NCO could expect to last for only one. Brigadier G. W. James, 'Psychiatric Lessons from Active Service', *Lancet*, 1945 Vol. II, p. 804.

² With death, however, the class divide was once again reaffirmed as officers were buried in a different part of the cemetery from other ranks. Carter, *Birmingham pals*, p. 102.

³ G. Ashurst, *My bit. A Lancashire fusilier at war 1914-1918*, Marlborough, 1987, p. 118.

⁴ O. Lyttelton, *From Peace to War*, London, 1968, pp. 103, 155.

being able to get a simple meal in an estaminet behind the lines, whilst officers tucked into slap up nosh. His diary records the same contempt felt by his men at having to ferry bags of 'rations' through waterlogged trenches, full of officer 'essentials' like whisky, rations which he confessed he had known to go astray on at least one occasion. A Fabian socialist, such inequalities were a major motive in Keeling's decision to decline a commission.¹

The NCO was, nevertheless, accorded a number of privileges that went some small way to compensating for the responsibilities and pressures of the rank. His additional pay allowed him to purchase a number of additional luxuries which were beyond the financial reach of the private soldier. Married senior NCOs, too, received an extra 2/6 per week separation allowance.² From the earliest days of training to life in the front line in France, the wartime NCO continued to enjoy many of the long established 'little considerations' that befitted his rank and were refused the ranker. During training on Epsom downs in September 1914, R. Lintott, an NCO with the 1/5th Battalion, London Rifle Brigade, wrote home of his delight at enjoying the same food as his officers.³ Privileges enjoyed during training set the tone for what was to come. Rough seas and confined space often conspired to make the Channel crossing to France an unpleasant experience for the rank and file. Not so for the senior NCOs. Where the ranker had to make do with a hard wooden floor below decks, officers and NCOs had cabins and bunks. Forced to seek out his quartermaster sergeant with a message, Bryan Latham found him and two other sergeants in a 2nd Class cabin 'making fine play with a Welsh rarebit apiece, washed down by bottled beer',⁴ Once disembarked in France, NCOs could look forward to the same degree of comfort on the second leg of the journey. A. Reeve, an artillery sergeant with the 16th Battery, recorded in his diary that he and his fellow sergeants enjoyed the luxury of first class train carriages on route to their battalions, whereas rankers were forced to travel in cattle wagons.⁵ Such privileges were part

¹ Townshend, *Keeling letters*, p. 212.

² Cooksey, *Barnsley Pals*, p. 74.

³ Lintott, letter, 16/9/14.

⁴ Latham, *Territorial*, p. 11.

⁵ Reeve, diary, 18.8.14.

of a deliberate policy of segregation by the military authorities, one designed to give the NCO a status distinct from the private soldier and so underline the former's authority.

The move to the front line only served to confirm the distance between NCO and ranker. NCOs, like their officers, enjoyed numerous perks - officially sanctioned and otherwise - which were denied the private soldier. NCOs were expected to place the needs of their men ahead of their own, but it was the sergeants who invariably ended up occupying the most comfortable billets. One infantryman remembered that the privileges enjoyed by his NCOs set them a 'breed apart' from their subordinates: whereas the rest of the men were obliged to occupy an open sided barn, the sergeants shared comfortable rooms in a local inn, the sergeant major and quartermaster sergeant commandeering a bedroom each.¹ The NCO's position in the army's 'engine room' - taking charge of and distributing rations and mail deliveries — afforded him ample opportunity to bolster his own meagre rations. It was the sergeants who invariably had first refusal of any 'extras', but junior NCOs, too, had ample opportunity to line their own pockets. H. Bartlett took only a day in the rank of lance corporal to be alerted to the privileges of the non-commissioned ranks, discovering many hidden extras and comforts 'that the others never smelt' .²

¹ Siepmann, *Echo of the Guns*, London, 1987, pp. 116, 143.

² Bartlett, memoir, p. 24.

Chapter 5: The NCO in combat

The consensus of opinion amongst high-ranking regular officers, both during and for some considerable time after the First World War, was that the temporary recruit of 1914-18 was but a poor imitation of his pre-war counterpart. That a huge volunteer force had been successfully mobilised at all, given its limited resources and in such a short space of time, was recognised as a considerable achievement. But in their rush to take to the field Kitchener's New Armies were left relatively ill-prepared for war. Next to the well-drilled, seasoned and steeled pre-war regular, the citizen soldier was hastily trained and ill prepared technically and emotionally for war; his conversion from civilian to soldier incomplete. If the temporary private suffered from comparison with his regular counterpart, it was the citizen NCO for whom the least favourable comparisons were reserved. The peacetime, long-service NCO was, as we have seen, held up as a paradigm of military excellence. He had served in the ranks and knew his men's jobs as well as his own; he was well trained - his body and skills honed in the hard climatic conditions of India; he possessed a thorough knowledge of every detail of the workings of his unit and his men; having proved himself able to receive orders with prompt obedience, he was the embodiment of discipline. The Kitchener NCO was, by contrast, hastily promoted - less on his merits than out of necessity - allowing him little time to absorb the basic skills of a private let alone those of a junior leader. In short, the temporary NCO lacked his regular number's habituation to army ways and, crucially, the bank of knowledge which only experience can bring and which served to underpin initiative; that capacity to know almost instinctively what to do in the difficult or unforeseen situation.

It was on the battlefield, unsurprisingly, that the temporary soldier's deficiencies were held to be the most glaring. Post-war assessments of the British army's battlefield performance laid part of the blame for several failed attacks at the feet of volunteer units, whose lack of initiative and quick-mindedness were identified as the principal reason for the failure to follow up initial breakthroughs: 'When British troops lost their officers, they were...apt to fall back, not because they were beaten but because they did not know what to

do and expected to receive fresh orders.¹ NCOs received disproportionate criticism for their failure to think on their feet and pull their weight when events wavered from the battle plan.² In the aftermath of the first day of the Somme offensive, a senior officer with the Cameronians complained: 'We found a lot of men of different battalions, but very few officers - these men seemed content to sit down and rest, and the NCOs were not enterprising, which contrasts unfavourably with the Hun practice.. .All our folk seem to be waiting for someone to come along and tell them what to do.'³ The chief purpose of this chapter is to examine the validity of such claims. Was it the case that the NCOs of the New Armies lacked the military knowledge, resourcefulness and tactical guile to cope with the unforeseen and unexpected, rendering them at best of little assistance to their officers, at worst a burden and liability? Or was it in fact possible that those in prominent positions were too ready to scapegoat the lower ranks and NCOs in particular for their own strategic and tactical blunders?

Much of the apparent justification for the criticism of the volunteer NCO stemmed, as indicated above, from his having been cast under the long shadow of the full-time professional. Any assessment of the quality of the temporary NCO must therefore begin with an evaluation of the fighting calibre of the pre-war regular and an investigation of the veracity of the claim, or indeed assumption, that the regular NCO was a model of tactical awareness, of initiative and resourcefulness. Certainly, it was an extremely professional British Expeditionary Force that embarked for France in the summer of 1914: well-disciplined, well-equipped and well-stocked with troops highly proficient in musketry. How well trained it was in preparation for the peculiar demands of modern warfare is, however, another matter. The common perception that the pre-war regular was, by definition, more hardened to army ways than the volunteer and therefore better prepared for the deprivations of war is dubious. Upon mobilisation the 160,000-strong B.E.F. possessed only 4,192 men with fifteen or more years

¹ Sir J. E. Edmonds, *Military operations: France and Belgium*, London, 1925-33, vol. II (1915), p. ix; vol. IV (1918), pp. 82, 183, 192, 292, 515; Report of the Committee on the Lessons of the Great War, p. 3, WO 32/3116.

² Edmonds, *Military Operations*, vol. III (1916), pp. 131-2.

³ R. C. Money, diary, 1.7.16., LULLC.

of continuous service. More significantly, over a quarter of the force had been in the army for less than two years, a length of service not considerably longer than the period of training received by the first waves of New Army volunteers.¹ And, of course, only a tiny minority of the first regulars to arrive on the Continent had ever been in combat.

Unfavourable comparisons between temporary and regular NCOs appear at first sight more valid. Many Kitchener men received a first stripe within weeks of enlistment and some were made sergeant in a matter of months. Although it is a myth, as shown, that all pre-war NCOs were expected to serve a minimum two years service in the ranks before becoming eligible for promotion, it is nevertheless true that most senior NCOs would have had at least five years under their belts before gaining a third stripe. There exists little doubt, therefore, that the regular NCO was more habituated to life in the army and possessed a greater generic knowledge of all things military than his temporary counterpart. How much of the regular NCO's additional years of service was spent productively engaged in preparation for battle and, more significantly, in preparation for junior leadership in battle is, however, less certain.

The military authorities had long been aware of the impact on tactics of the development of modern firearms and the need to turn out soldiers who could think and act independently amid the fog of war. As early as 1889 it was acknowledged that 'The conditions of modern warfare render it imperative that all ranks shall be taught to think, and, subject to their general instructions and to accepted principles, to act for themselves'.² A decade on, the war in South Africa revealed the dangers of launching exposed, frontal attacks against long-range modern rifles and the need, instead, for a greater emphasis on operations in extended order, involving small attack formations using cover and concealed positions. The authorities recognised that the consequence of this would be men scattered across the battlefield and acknowledged the need to grant greater autonomy to junior leaders, including NCO section leaders, to execute the plan of attack.³ In the aftermath of the South African conflict, NCOs were therefore expected to possess a sound theoretical knowledge of fire

¹ D. Ascoli, *The Mons Star*, London, 1981, p. 8.

² *Infantry Drill*, 1889, p. 36.

³ Maj. H. J. Craufurd, *The Field Training of a Company of Infantry*, London, 1902, pp. 10, 17, 18.

discipline, use of cover, even of how to take command of a section in advancing from one fire position to another.¹

Some regiments displayed a keenness to put theory into practice, promoting initiative amongst their junior ranks by allowing and encouraging NCOs to take charge of sections during field exercises without direct supervision from their officers.² But this was not the norm. By 1914, field training had become much more comprehensive than ten years earlier, but its emphasis remained on showpiece brigade and divisional manoeuvres rather than battalion and company practice, let alone section work. When it did take place, training at battalion level suffered from a combination of the army's perennial problems of a high turnover of men and the employment of troops in non-military duties such as sergeant tailors, cooks and transport workers.³ Without doubt the greatest obstacle to productive field training, however, was the army's command structure, which militated against initiative, and not just initiative amongst the lower ranks. From the highest echelons to the lowliest grades, the British army's hierarchy of authority was one rooted in a strict deference to superiors. One contemporary observed that: 'The colonel is afraid of the general, the regimental officers of the colonel and so on.. .as a result.. .all initiative is ruthlessly stamped out for fear a mistake of a junior should be visited on the head of a senior.'⁴ Moreover, tactics were driven as much by considerations of social control as purely practical responses to the likely new battlefield conditions. The promotion of too much initiative and independent thought and action amongst the junior ranks would, it was feared, encourage the rank and file to question the authority - and therefore legitimacy - of their superiors. The granting of a greater autonomy to subordinates would therefore have signalled a dangerous radicalism. Ultimately, the authorities came down on the side of control over initiative, their justification, if any were needed, grounded in the predictably class-based prejudice that the lower ranks possessed insufficient intelligence to cope with greater autonomy. Initiative, it was concluded, was a

¹ Wright, *Non-Commissioned Officer's Examiner*, pp. 40-41; Gale and Polden, *Section & Company Drill Made Easy*, Aidershot, 1911, p. 25.

² Commandant de Thomasson, 'The British army exercise of 1913', *Army Review*, 6, Jan. 1914, p. 149.

³ Spiers, 'The regular army', p. 47.

⁴ "An Infantry Adjutant", 'Training of the Officer and NCO', p. 495.

quality deemed desirable in the NCO, but was ‘not usually found in the class from which the N.C.O. is drawn’.¹

The army’s reluctance to foster initiative amongst its lower ranks was not confined to field training. The whole culture of pre-war barrack life was designed to discourage improvisation and independent thought and action. Upon entry into the army, the new recruit surrendered both his civilian freedom and with it all responsibility. From day one, every detail of the new recruit’s life was prescribed or provided for him: the time he slept and woke, his hours of work, when and what he was fed. In principal this served to unburden men from many of the humdrum concerns of civilian life, leaving them free to devote mind and body to their work. In reality, however, army work made few demands upon the soldier’s resourcefulness and initiative. Indeed, both were smothered beneath a blanket of deadening chores and repetitive, arduous fatigues. It was not productive training that filled the private soldier’s working day, but brass polishing, guard duty and route marching: ‘Pipe-clay, antiquated and useless forms of drill, blind obedience to orders, ramrod-like rigidity on parade, and similar time-honoured practices were the chief qualifications by which a regiment was judged.’² Orderliness, cleanliness and smartness, so essential for the maintenance of efficiency in combat, in peacetime became self-fulfilling, at best geared towards the niceties of the parade ground, at worst an end in themselves.³ Drill, in the army’s opinion, remained the most effective means of converting civilian into soldier, achieving the dual purpose of building physique and stamina while subjecting the individual will to strict obedience.⁴ The authorities paid lip service to calls for less drill and parade ground precision and a greater priority to practical training, but change was nevertheless quietly repressed in practice.⁵

The stultifying routine of barrack life in turn made few demands on the initiative of the pre-war NCO. Although he had a wider variety of tasks to perform and greater

¹ Ibid, p. 494.

² W. Robertson, *Private to Field Marshall*, p. 15.

³ J. Brunlees Patterson, *Life in the Ranks of the British Army*, London, 1883, p.15; Kentish, *Maxims*, p. 3.

⁴ M. Foucault, *Discipline And Punishment*, London, 1991, p. 138.

⁵ Army order of 16, Jan. 1914, WO 123/56, PRO; Lt. Col. A. Pollock, ‘The recruiting difficulty’, *Nineteenth Century*, Vol. LXXII, 1912, p. 516.

responsibilities to shoulder than the private, the NCO was just as much the victim of timetable and procedure. ‘Never...did I get into trouble,’ remembered one pre-war NCO, ‘for I never troubled to think.’¹ It was a deadening routine that would have serious repercussions for the war to come, paralysing, in the estimation of some, the regular NCO’s capacities for field leadership. ‘Out of such a sameness,’ wrote A. Hanbury-Sparrow, a pre-war regular officer with the 1st Royal Berkshire Regiment who served in France, on and off, for the four years of the war, ‘it was difficult to get good pre-war NCOs, for their personality was not strong enough to make headway against the tide of normality.’² The pre-war military authorities nevertheless held firm in their belief that a diet of strict routine and continuous practice on the drill square would produce a disciplined soldier prepared for any eventuality. As Sir Ian Hamilton, the then Lieutenant-General Commander-in-Chief of Southern Command and a man of some intellect, pronounced in 1906: ‘The South African and Manchurian experiences tend to show that men who are smart on parade are more alert, more readily controlled, more obedient, and move more rapidly and with less tendency to confusion or panic than troops which depend entirely on their individual qualities.’³ Actively discouraged in peacetime, the British soldier’s spirit of independence would nevertheless be forthcoming when most needed: in combat. Quite how this would come about was never clearly identified.

The First World War presented the army with an opportunity to alter its approach to discipline. Though it would be inaccurate, as shown in chapter two, to view the volunteer force as one brimful of middle-class, well-educated recruits, it is evident that the ranks of the New Armies did include some of the best and brightest men that Britain had to offer; at the very least many more men of better quality than the army’s traditional peacetime intake. The working-class volunteer, too, was typically a more highly skilled and, at least to begin with, a more altruistically motivated recruit than his pre-war predecessor. In short, the Kitchener volunteer presented the army with a potential asset: here was a man whose intelligence and

¹ Edmondson, *John Bull’s Army*, p. 101.

² A. Hanbury-Sparrow, *The Land-Locked Lake*, London, 1932, p. 212.

³ Spiers, ‘The regular army’, p. 47.

enthusiasm could be harnessed and channelled into productive junior leadership, a man in whom the army could invest a greater degree of autonomy than before.¹

The authorities, however, saw the new intake as problematic. They were wary of the more educated recruit, a man they saw as likely to be confident, assertive and resistant to army authority. The working-class recruit they continued to view, as they had always done, with deep suspicion; a suspicion strengthened by the rise in militant trade unionism. The army saw no reason, therefore, to modify its pre-war approach to training and discipline. Indeed, if change were needed at all, it was that discipline should be tightened and the emphasis on drill underlined. The authorities recognised - correctly - that the 'honeymoon period' of training for Kitchener's New Armies would be short lived and that with the inevitable waning of enthusiasm would come a need for stricter discipline. They knew, moreover, that like the new apprentice, enthusiastic but without as yet the tools of his trade, the volunteer, however willing, was unlikely to last long on the battlefield without the rudiments of intense training and drill.

The continued emphasis on disciplined obedience over initiative also fitted with the army's prediction of the nature of the battles to come and of the tactical formations that would be required. Close order drill, not individual initiative, would be needed. Men would need to stay tight together in disciplined formations if they were to successfully negotiate the fire-zone, their much practised close order drill holding them together literally and figuratively. Besides, if all went according to plan the British infantry would, following the artillery's intensive and accurate bombardment of the enemy lines, simply stroll across the field of battle and occupy the German trenches. The authorities estimated little need for initiative in their tactical equations.

The reality of course was not so smooth. The failure of the artillery to do its job - the combined result of defective shells and deeply entrenched enemy lines - left men cruelly exposed to machine gun fire with the result that troops lucky enough to survive unscathed were scattered across the battlefield; precisely the scenario in which initiative and small group

¹ D. Winter, *Death's Men: Soldiers of the Great War*, London, 1978, pp. 44-47.

leadership would be at a premium. But the real consequences of the army's failure to foster initiative emerged, paradoxically, with success. The army, at least early on in the war, was reluctant to invest more than a minimum of trust in its junior leaders. Company and platoon commanders were given little insight into battle plans and were furnished with no more than their immediate objectives, beyond which they knew little. The decision to withhold strategic plans from the junior ranks was in part underpinned by the need to maintain secrecy. In the main, however, it was down to control. Set-piece offensives, at least until the last few months of the war, were fought on a wide front, demanding coordination between infantry units and - to secure protection for the advancing troops beneath the artillery's 'creeping barrage' of cannon fire - synchronisation between infantry and artillery. The authorities were wary of granting too much knowledge and authority to subordinates for fear that their actions might lead to a divergence from the centralised battle plan.¹ Units acting too much on their own initiative might push too far, leaving themselves cut off from support and exposed, jeopardising themselves, those units at their flanks and the whole offensive.

But the consequence of the authorities' insistence on clinging to centralised control was a paralysis of communications. Communication between front and rear became extremely difficult once the attack got under way, with sustained artillery fire leaving telephone lines frequently disabled. Fresh orders could not be easily transmitted nor could the situation on the ground be quickly relayed back to headquarters. This resulted in crucial delays so that initial allied breakthroughs of the enemy line were not followed up, allowing the enemy time to regroup, counter-attack and reclaim the territory lost.²

If officers were kept largely in the dark about the attack, NCOs and rankers generally knew even less. C. E. Crutchley, who in the second half of the war joined the machine-gun corps, a semi-autonomous body permitted a relatively free rein over its own affairs, recalled the mentality of the British High Command during the first years of the war:

'To give everyone taking part in an attack some idea of what they were expected to do by showing them a map, pointing to their starting point, their objective and the route thereto, was, at that time,

¹ Samuels, *Command Or Control?*, p. 49.

² J. M. Bourne, *Britain and the Great War 1914-18*, London, 1989, p. 171.

simply not done. The mere suggestion as to the wisdom of such a proceeding would have sent many of the old Boer War type into permanent apoplexy.¹

The reluctance to furnish the lower ranks with anything more than a skeletal outline of the battle plans had crucial implications for NCO section leaders and the lives of the fifteen men (60 if a platoon officer became a casualty) in their charge. As one officer commented, 'the junior NCOs had the responsibility of keeping in touch with their platoon sergeant, of keeping their men in touch with one another, often without knowing exactly what was expected of them'.²

Of the few divisional commands that did choose to trust their subordinate commanders with a more detailed battle plan, the attack stood a better chance of meeting with some success. On the first day of the Somme offensive, a day of almost universal calamity for the British forces, the 18th Division - a New Army formation under the enlightened command of Major-General Sir Ivor Maxse, achieved one of the day's few successes at Montauban. The success was due in large part to a combination of detailed planning - models of the enemy trenches were reproduced from aerial reconnaissance photographs - and all ranks being given a clear idea of their own role in the attack and what was expected of them in the event of officer and NCO casualties. The result, as the official record testifies, was that even when the majority of officers had been knocked out, NCOs and men 'showed enterprise and carried on according to the programme'.³

Major offensives by either side were nevertheless rare and the character of the war on the Western Front proved to be largely defensive. Britain and her allies strove to maintain the spirit of the offensive - in terms of night patrols of no-man's land and midnight sorties into enemy lines - but, except along those exposed stretches of the line rendered permanently active by geography or strategic worth, the war became for the most part a conflict of attrition. Initiative was, therefore, not at a premium in most aspects of trench life. The nature of trench warfare placed the emphasis less on enterprise than on steadfastness, on stubborn defence rather than dashing manoeuvre. Initiative, in as far as it was required in the daily routine of trench warfare, became less about killing the enemy than staying alive, of literally

¹ Crutchley, *Machine Gunner 1914-18*, p. 37.

² Glover, *Fateful Battle Line*, p. 105.

³ Fox, *On the Somme*, pp. 16, 24.

keeping one's head down. Life on the front line was one of dull but necessary routine, of strict adherence to timetabled routine; in many respects uncannily reminiscent of life in the peacetime army. Acting-Captain L. J. Baker of the 2nd Suffolks celebrated the resilience and dogged determination of his men, amongst whom there were few regulars: 'steady and slow, not dashing and daring. Reliable men.'¹ Indispensable for coping with the daily grind of trench warfare, such virtues nevertheless quickly turned to vices on the battlefield. Men became so inured to the life of routine that apathy and passivity were the result. When finally called on for action, the months of stasis took their toll. Physically trench-bound for so long, men remained psychologically trench-bound when called into action; quick to dig in at the first opportunity and hold on to their limited gains rather than push on and drive home the advantage.²

Even the best intentions of the army served to militate against initiative. The British regular officer was educated to believe that it was his duty, and his alone, to lead and lead by example; an ethos underpinned in part by the army's jaundiced belief that the ranker could not be trusted to take care of himself. Rooted in the best intentions, it was a paternalistic ethos which nevertheless manifested itself in petty militarism and a tendency to wet-nurse subordinates, including NCOs. Officers showed a reluctance to delegate responsibility to their NCOs, insisting instead on overseeing many of the most trivial and routine of tasks; tasks which could comfortably have been performed by a subordinate.³ Work parties and mail and ration deliveries up to the front would invariably be supervised by an officer. A platoon sergeant at Ypres who saw the worst of the fighting in August 1917, remembered his reaction of surprise when ordered to take a handful of men and locate some undelivered rations, 'since it was not normally a job for an NCO without an officer'.⁴ Elsewhere, Edwin Campion Vaughan, a temporary officer in the 1 /8th Royal Warwickshire Regiment, made the mistake of delegating a minor task to his NCO only to be rebuffed by his senior who considered it a task

¹ Quoted in Macdonald, *Passchendaele*, p. 181.

² S. Bidwell and D. Graham, *Fire Power: British Army Weapons and Theories of War 1904-1945*, London, 1982, p. 121.

³ 5th Army notes and lessons on 1916 operations, WO 158/344, PRO.

⁴ Lane, memoir, p. 13.

that an officer should perform and promptly instructed Vaughan to take a push bike to catch up the work detail.¹ The reluctance to delegate any but the most menial duties to subordinates was damaging. It served to not only to discourage initiative amongst NCOs, but also to diminish the status of the NCO, since the officer's hesitancy to place implicit trust in his NCO's ability to carry out any but the most menial tasks sent out the message that it was only he, the officer, who was truly capable of providing for the needs and security of the unit. Worst of all, however, it led to disproportionately high officer casualties as thousands of promising young subalterns were killed doing the work of lance-corporals.²

As the war drew on, however, the British officer's reluctance to delegate greater authority to his NCOs became a luxury the army could no longer afford. High casualty rates amongst officers obliged units to entrust their NCOs with a greater degree of authority. This typically, though not always, meant a senior NCO taking on some of the lesser responsibilities of his platoon leader, usually on an ad hoc basis until a replacement officer could be found.³ The army's preferred course of action following the injury or death of an officer was to find a replacement either from its pool of officer reserves or by commissioning a man from the ranks. As a rule, the search for a replacement seldom took long, at least early on in the war when the army still had a relatively deep pool of officer reserves to draw on. Yet even then there were exceptions, and NCOs might find themselves doing officer's work for months rather than days.⁴ By the latter half of the war replacements could take an age to arrive and indeed might not arrive at all - either through a shortage of available candidates or bureaucracy — with the result that an NCO found himself carrying on indefinitely in his dual capacity; effectively an officer in all but name.⁵

Senior NCOs who took on additional responsibilities in the running of their platoons and companies rarely found their extra duties wholly unfamiliar. Many of his 'new' duties, such as taking charge of work details, carrying parties, the distribution of rations and mail,

¹ Vaughan, *Some desperate Glory*, p.23.

² Hanbury-Sparrow, *Land Locked Lake*, p. 212.

³ Riddell and Clayton, *Cambridgeshires*, p. 241.

⁴ Anderson, *Unbreakable Coil*, p. 56; Anon, *Scrap Book of the 7th Bn. Somerset Light Infantry*, p. 127.

⁵ French, *Gone for a Soldier*, p. 22; Packham, memoir, p. 23.

were all tasks the NCO had some experience of sharing with an officer; the difference now was that they were tasks the NCO was expected to perform independent of a superior. Over time, however, officer casualties ensured that the NCO played a much more prominent role in the running of his unit; NCOs in some instances becoming junior partners in the running of their units. R. W. F. Johnston, a platoon sergeant with the 9th Royal Scots, and his platoon officer split their working day between them. For the hours that his superior slept, Johnston was the senior figure in his platoon, responsible for the supervision of his four section corporals as well as the posting of sentries and the supervision of trench repairs.¹ Elsewhere, Vivian de Sola Pinto handed much of his work to his senior NCO, a man who he grew to trust implicitly and view as a fellow officer and a man who had effortlessly filled the shoes of no less a figure than the injured Siegfried Sassoon.²

Duties once seen as the sole preserve of officers were increasingly entrusted to NCOs. Night patrols were a prime example. It was a long established practice for officers and NCOs to share night patrols of no-man's-land together but it was rare for an NCO to take charge of a detail alone. Now, however, midnight sorties and even enemy trench raids were delegated to NCOs.³ This served the dual purpose of allowing overstretched officers much needed rest while affording the NCO invaluable experience of tactical leadership. While the NCO's trench bound duties required he do little more than receive and regurgitate the same orders, trench raids demanded more enterprise. Night sorties were characterised by their narrow, clearly defined objectives, but even the most limited of operations demanded a considerable degree of initiative and tactical awareness of its unit leaders:

‘The character of these operations.. .the preparation of a road through our own and the enemy's wire, the crossing of the open ground unseen, the penetration of the enemy's trenches, the hand-to-hand fighting in the darkness, and the uncertainty as to the strength of the opposing forces, give peculiar scope to the gallantry, dash, and quickness of decision of the troops engaged... ’⁴

¹ Johnston, memoir, p. 11.

² V. de Sola Pinto, ‘My First War: Memoirs of a Spectacled Subaltern’, in Panichas, *Promise of Greatness*, p. 82.

³ “Tactician”, *The Battalion In Attack*, London, 1916, p. 44.

⁴ E. Wyrall, *The History of the Second Division 1914-1918*, Vol. I, London, 1921, p. 245.

Prepared though it was to credit the NCO with a greater degree of initiative in the day-to-day running of his unit and even minor skirmishing in no-man s-land, the army was slow to grant the NCO a more autonomous battlefield role. In combat, just as out of it, the NCO's primary responsibility remained the maintenance of discipline. His job was to keep his unit on task, chivvying and rallying and, if necessary, threatening men who had gone to ground or showed signs of slacking or straggling (military law dictated the NCO shoot any man fleeing the field of battle, but amid the confusion of battle it was often impossible to detect the wilful deserter from the wounded man struggling to find his way back to his own lines. It therefore seems unlikely that more than a handful of NCOs chose to follow the law to the letter).¹ Between them the officer and senior NCO book-ended their platoon in combat, but it was the officer who led; the persistent belief being that only officers possessed the necessary qualities demanded of a leader in battle. The officer's place was therefore at the front; by contrast, the NCO traditionally brought up the rear. This, however, was a tactical arrangement which was not to last.

In their search for a breakthrough to the stalemate on the Western Front, the military authorities were compelled to confront the tactical failings of the previous two years. The failed Somme offensive especially had provided a harsh lesson in the shortcomings of centralised control and the need for a shift in decision making to local commanders closer to the action; officers who could make an immediate tactical response to unfolding events rather than have to sit and wait for a decision to be made for them. Together with the decision to grant a greater degree of autonomy to divisional and battalion commanders, the army also acknowledged the need to keep junior leaders (company and platoon officers and NCOs) more fully briefed of battle plans. These were concessions made in part as a response to the mistakes of the past, but they owed more to the changed landscape of the battlefield and advances in technology. The unbroken continuous trench lines of the first few years of the

¹ A. Reeve, an artillery sergeant, possessed a revolver with which he confessed he 'had to do some work with' when his men scattered under shellfire. Reeve, diary, 90/21/1; W. L. Andrews had to resort to threats of death to get stragglers to fight on. Andrews, *Haunting Years*, p. 244; see also Abraham, memoir, p. 105 and G. D. Roberts, *Witness these Letters: Letters from the Western front 1915-18*, Denbeigh, 1983, p. 22.

war had, by late 1916, been replaced by scattered craters, concrete pill-boxes; staccato terrain over which it would be impossible for solid line formations to pass. Instead of the ponderous, desultory waves of troops that had attempted to cross the fire zone of the Somme, the emphasis was now shifted to small, mobile teams of infantry — typically sections of between six and nine men, each under the command of an NCO and each capable of acting independent of direct intervention. These new tightly-knit, purposeful units were made possible by new technology. By the middle of the war front line units were armed with Stokes mortars, rifle-grenades and Lewis guns (mobile, hand-held machine guns which allowed for greater mobility and flexibility).¹ Equipped with their new weaponry, these smaller units, it was believed, stood a realistic chance of negotiating the fire-zone.

In early 1917 it appeared that they had been given the chance. In March of that year, Ludendorff made the decision to divert troops from the west in a concentrated push against the Italians; and to this end abandoned the over-stretched German front line in the west, retiring some twenty miles to the newly constructed, layered defensive position of the ‘Hindenburg Line’. Though, as the allies were soon to discover, the Hindenburg Line was a much more formidable defensive line than the German’s previous position, the German tactical withdrawal appeared to offer conclusive evidence that the allies were winning the war. The German abandonment of their old positions provided a welcome shot in the arm to British morale, but also appeared to open up the possibility of open warfare as the British infantry followed up the retreating Germans. The new technology coupled with the prospect, however slight, of more mobile warfare, sparked a new zeal for productive combat training.

The first few years of the war had been a period of stagnation for field training. The tactical training of infantry had been shaped by the realities of trench warfare, not the prospect of open warfare. At best, training had served to foster those qualities deemed desirable for survival in the front line - durability and fortitude rather than initiative and dash. At worst, it

¹ Upon his attachment to the Machine Gun Corps, George Coppard discovered that ‘an unpaid lance-corporal in charge of a gun in action, who became detached from his own superiors, would be the sole judge as to the best position for his gun, and when and where it should be fired’ Coppard, *Machine-gun*, p. 66; By 1918, machine-gun and mortar crews were typical of most platoons. B. I. Gudmundsson, *Stormtroop Tactics: innovation in the German Army, 1914-1918*, New York, 1989, pp. 101-102.

remained little more than a byword for parade ground drill and spit and polish, of occupying and busying men rather than fostering worthwhile military skills. Training for the most part had afforded little practice to the NCO in his capacity as section leader. The NCO, like the private, had been confined to the drill square. Now, though, the possibility of a breakthrough on the battlefield resulted in a frenzy of manuals and pamphlets and a mass of courses and training programmes for NCOs, aimed at promoting tactical awareness and initiative amongst section leaders.¹ Previously assigned only a vague responsibility for discipline on the battlefield, the NCO was granted a greater autonomy to lead his section in the field. It was a new dynamic battlefield role which carried with it a level of initiative previously only granted to officers.² How well the NCO would respond, having been discouraged from using his initiative for so long, remained to be seen.

An evaluation of the performance of the NCO in his capacity as section leader is best conducted by an assessment of the performance of the British army in the final year of the war, by which time the strictures of the new training manuals had been absorbed and the army made full its commitment to a policy of decentralised initiative. To be sure, the coordination of Lewis gun sections, trench mortar and machine gun crews had played a significant role as early as 1916, notably in 54th Brigade's success at Thiepval in 1916.³ The Third Battle of Ypres, too, though ultimately a costly strategic failure, had contained genuine tactical successes: the small scale offensives of bite and hold fought by Plumer's Second Army at the battles of the Menin Road, Polygon Wood, and Broodseinde between late September and early October along with the initially brilliantly successful Cambrai offensive all served as proof that the British army's new tactics were being rewarded. But the real dividends came in the final few months of the war, the so called 'Hundred Days' (8 August - 11 November) when, in their advance to victory, the British forces fought a series of brilliant operations to

¹ Maxse, *Hints on Training*, p. 9; 8th Battalion East Kent Regiment war diary, WO 95/2207, PRO; Shepherd, *Sergeant Major's War*, p. 85.

² Maxse, *Hints on Training*, pp. 9, 13; Stewart and Sheen, *Tyneside Scottish*, p. 127; A. R. Buxton, *The Rifle Brigade*, London, 1918, p. 74; Wyrall, *History of the Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry*, p. 151; Hall, *Kitchener's Mob*, p. 122.

³ Lt. Gen. I. Maxse, *The 18th Division in the Battle of the Ancre*, 1916, pp. 7-8.

break through the Hindenburg Line, skilfully outmanoeuvring their stubborn defenders from a series of river and canal lines.¹ Initiative should not be overstated. As important as any tactical awareness shown by NCOs were the qualities which had held men together through months of stasis: dour resilience and dogged determination. But, as Peter Simkins has recognised, the achievements of the British army in overcoming such a wide variety of tactical obstacles and challenges, ranging from set-piece operations to skirmishing and street fighting and canal crossings on improvised rafts, would simply not have been possible without the initiative and resourcefulness shown by section leaders.²

Numerous personal memoirs testify to the combat effectiveness of the British NCO, especially in the latter part of the war. Indeed, examples of individual acts of battlefield initiative and resourcefulness by NCOs are so numerous as to be almost common place. A few, however, merit special mention for the way they serve to demonstrate the leadership capabilities of the temporary NCO: Sergeant Eric Cooper of the 12th Bn Kings Rifle Corps, for instance, who lost all his superiors during the battle for Passchendaele in August 1917, took his officer's gun and map and led his men in the capture of a concrete blockhouse with 45 prisoners and 7 machine-guns; or the five NCOs of the 11th Royal Fusiliers who won DCMs at Glencorse Wood and Inverness Copse in August 1917 for 'taking charge of officerless companies and inspiring waverers to repel repeated counter-attacks'.³

The personal testimonies of rankers should not be viewed as any less reliable a source than the official record. Indeed, if anything they perhaps serve as a more accurate measure of the NCO's effectiveness. The private soldier expected to be led by an officer and a gentleman and leadership was not something he readily identified with the rank of NCO. The officer rank, moreover, carried with it an inherent weight, whereas the NCO had to prove himself

¹ G. Blaxland, *Amiens 1918*, London, 1981, p. 8.

² P. Simkins, 'Co-Stars or Supporting Cast?', p. 65.

³ Sgt. E. Cooper, 12th Bn. K.R.R.C., edited transcript of tape-recording, LULLC; P. Simkins, 'The War Experience of a Typical Kitchener Division 304; For other examples see Lane memoir, p. 19; Douie, *Weary Road*, p. 178; Crutchley, *Machine Gunner*, p. 99; Milner, *Leeds Pals*, p. 275; Carter, *Birmingham Pals*, p. 192; Major-Gen. Sir A. B. Scott, *History Of The 12th (Eastern) Division In The Great War, 1914-1918*, London, 1923, p. 218; J. Lee, 'The British Divisions at Third Ypres', in P. H. Liddle (ed.), *Passchendaele in Perspective: the 3rd Battle of Ypres*, London, 1997, p. 224.

worthy of respect.¹ The private soldier was, therefore, more likely to cast a critical eye over the leadership credentials of his NCO than his officer. By the latter part of the war, however, it was not uncommon for the rank and file to categorise their NCOs as ‘leaders’.² W. Morgan, a private with the 10/11th Battalion Highland Light Infantry whose unit was engaged in fierce fighting to secure Frezenberg Ridge, wrote with pride of his Sergeant McCormack: ‘He kept the whole thing going in our sector and all the officers left it to him. He was the best man, and they knew it.’³ The traditional criteria by which officers were judged — breeding, education and accent - had, by 1918, become less important than military knowledge, tactical awareness and coolness under fire. Status and prestige were assigned to the man who, regardless of rank, possessed those attributes.

The tendency for high ranking officers to pin much of the blame for the disastrous British offensives of the first three years of the war on inexperienced junior leaders is therefore unjustified.⁴ Doubtless there were many individual NCOs who failed to impress, but the failures of the Somme and Third Ypres owed less to a lack of intelligent action by junior leaders than the strategic short-sightedness of their superiors.⁵ When finally given the chance, the British NCO showed he was more than capable of intelligent action and leadership. That the NCO’s resourcefulness and leadership skills were acknowledged by his men and officers on the ground is clear; that those talents were not harnessed sooner owed much to the prejudice of an officer corps determined to place more stock in breeding than merit.

¹ Watson, *War On The Mind*, p.146

² Riddell and Clayton, *Cambridgeshires* p. 196.

³ Quoted in Macdonald, *Passchendaele*, p. 109.

⁴ For a discussion of the role and motives of the official historian, see D. French, ‘“Official but not History”?’ Sir James Edmonds and the Official History of the Great War’, *Journal of the Royal United Services Institute for Defence Studies*, CXXXI, 1986, pp. 58-63.

⁵ Lt. Gen. Sir G. M. Harper, *Notes On Infantry Tactics & Training*, London, 1919, p. 20.

Conclusion

The British attitude to the run up to war has been described as one characterised by ‘dismay, indecision and eventually determination’. Between the Archduke’s assassination and the Austro-Hungarian ultimatum, it is argued, there was little but apathy, ignorance, and distraction; highlighted by the lack of coverage by a British press more interested in events across the Irish sea.¹ What is more, the belief that the First World War, when it came, received a unanimously euphoric reception throughout Britain is inaccurate: in some quarters there were pockets of firm opposition while elsewhere the conflict was accepted rather than embraced.² Nevertheless, it remains clear that there was a genuine ground-swell of opinion in Britain in favour of the war, not just in the towns but in rural areas as well.³ The initial flood of volunteers which spilled out of government recruiting offices was indicative of the existence of a deep, popular enthusiasm for the war, an enthusiasm borne from feelings of national identity and pride in Britain’s empire. The first wave of volunteers would soon level out, as much from army inefficiency as waning enthusiasm, but the nation’s will to continue would hold firm.

Over the next four years, just as Britain’s civilian population would prove its durability, so too would her armies in France. At times, the war would test to the limit the morale of the army, but, though the spirit of some men would strain and buckle under the demands of trench warfare, the majority would retain their will to fight. Given the fate that would befall the forces of Europe’s other great powers, the endurance of the British army on the Western front is in itself a remarkable achievement. What makes it more so is that the vast majority of its ranks was made up not of seasoned professionals, but of volunteers and conscripts, civilians in uniform who, despite being ill-trained and poorly equipped, by July 1st, 1916 constituted ‘the major fighting force of the Entente powers on the Western Front’.⁴

¹ L. L. Farrar, ‘Reluctant Warriors: Public Opinion During the July Crisis 1914’, *Eastern European Quarterly*, 16, 4, 1982, p. 436.

² Howard, ‘Europe 1914’, p. 22.

³ K. Grieves, ‘Lowther’s Lambs’: Rural Paternalism and Voluntary Recruitment in WW1’, *Rural History*, 4, 1, 1993.

⁴ T. Wilson and R. Prior, ‘Summing up the Somme’, *History Today*, Nov. 1991, p. 40.

From the moment the war started, the efficiency of the British army entered a decline. Britain lacked both the weapons and trained troops to, at least on paper, represent a match for the formidably prepared German army. To make matters worse, in the opening months of the war while the New Armies still trained, Britain's regular units were virtually wiped out bearing the full brunt of the German attack. Battle-hardened NCOs were especially missed, with their 'coolness, their military skills, their habituation to army ways, and their knowledgeability about how to make the best of conditions'.¹ Unlike his regular counterpart, the citizen soldier had no experience of war nor had a few months of basic training provided him with the steel to cope with what was to come. Yet Kitchener's volunteers would prove themselves worthy replacements, surviving the attritional battles of the middle years of the war, withstanding the onslaught of the German spring offensive of 1918, and finally advancing to victory.

In seeking an explanation for the British army's endurance, it is tempting to overstate the part played by discipline. It has been said of the ranks of the British army that: 'No attack, however forlorn, however fatal, found them without ardour. No slaughter however desolating prevented them from returning to the charge. No physical conditions however severe deprived their commanders of their obedience and loyalty'.² The implication behind Winston Churchill's testimony to the pluck of the British Tommy is that the High Command had little to fear from its working-class troops, men who in civilian life had made up the most highly disciplined industrial labour force in the world. While the French troops mutinied and the Russian forces collapsed, the British Tommy's sturdy and cheerful deference saw him through. The assertion that the British volunteer was a relatively biddable proposition has its supporters. Generations of deference in the Victorian classroom and workplace had, it is claimed, offered up a pliant fighting force.³ Yet the overwhelming majority of volunteers and conscripts who filled the ranks of the British army belonged to a class that was increasingly

¹ Fuller, *Troop Morale*, p. 41.

² W. Churchill, *The World Crisis*, London, 1965 edn., p. 750.

³ K. D. Brown, *The English Labour Movement, 1700-1951*, London, 1982, p. 184.

calling into question the 'certainties' of Edwardian Britain. To be sure, the threat of the firing squad played on men's minds and there is no denying that the soldier's readiness to carry out orders and do his duty, at times under the most appalling conditions, was due in part to the effects of drill. But an army of men held together purely by the shackles of coercion could not have recovered from the devastating setback of the first few days of the Somme and launch, as it did, a series of damaging attacks against the German army. Nor could it have displayed the spirit necessary to carry on after the slaughter of Passchendaele and still, in early 1918, repel a numerically superior force.

Discipline undoubtedly played a significant part in helping British troops endure material hardship and cope with the terror of combat. Ultimately, however, the durability of the British soldier owed less to coercion than paternalism. Young and inexperienced recruits, many of whom were no more than boys upon enlistment, were shepherded through the war by officers and NCOs, instilled in whom was a deep sense of duty to their men. Together, officers and NCOs acted as both a physical and an emotional buffer, shielding their men from some of the worst excesses of an arbitrary military machine. When it finally came, the Allied victory owed much to the improvements in tactical and operational methods and the impact - as much psychological as physical - of the arrival of a large United States force on the Western Front. But, had not morale remained intact throughout the duration of the war, such factors would have counted for little. That morale remained intact was thanks in no small part to the attentiveness of the British NCO.

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