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Writers in the Army.

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W R I T E R S I N T H E A R M Y

By

Sgt. K l a u s M a n n

In a modern army, technicians are almost as important as heroes. Specialists of every kind are needed -- doctors and engineers, cooks and radio operators, truck-drivers and pharmacists, mail clerks and X-ray experts, nurses and carpenters, barbers and camera men, printers and mathematicians, stenographers and lawyers, chaplains and pugilists. There are requests even for psychoanalysts, dancers, and cemetery supervisors. Musicians, singers, actors and entertainers can be extremely useful: they help to keep up the morale. Of course, movie stars are most ~~and~~ welcome: their presence in the army adds to its glamour and attractiveness. Teachers and professors may be of a certain value in the army's educational program. But writers? Of what use can a poet or novelist be in a military organization?

The relation between army and literature is traditionally cool, if not hostile. Soldiers are inclined to think of literary men as whimsical egoists and neurotic dreamers. As for the writers, they may admire, or even love, the heroic, but are instinctively opposed to the organized boredom and brutality which, to them, is militarism.

Of course, this natural aversion can be overcome under the pressure of dramatic circumstances. Writers and poets have not only praised the heroism of others but have also proved their own fighting spirit -- actually and in person. Their martial enthusiasm, however, turned usually out to be somewhat hectic and transient. Either it was ended by an untimely death -- as in the tragic cases of Charles Peguy and Rupert Brooks -- or the militant inspiration turned into

its very contrary. Most of the creative minds who saw action the first World War, and survived the colossal slaughter, came back from it as fervent pacifists.

This time the situation is different. Not that progressive writers betrayed their pacifistic ideals -- naturally not. But the majority of them -- no matter what their nationality or political viewpoint -- realize clearly and passionately the crucial significance of the present struggle. Their ardent interest in its outcome is due, not only to a general concern in the cause of civilization, but also to more specific, not to say: professional, considerations. A Hitler victory would be disastrous to everybody but particularly so for the literary guild. In a Nazi-dominated world, all decent intellectuals would have to commit suicide, as they have actually done, by the dozens and hundreds, in the occupied European countries.

Writers are partisans in this war -- decidedly, emphatically so. That is not to say that they revel in bloodthirsty ecstasies, as did many of their colleagues in 1914. This time, their concern is of a different kind -- sober, grim, realistic. They do not content themselves with the roles of sympathetic observers or critical commentators. It is their ambition to contribute more actively to the collective effort. The total mobilization of our energies and resources does not exempt literature, and the men who represent the literatures of the United Nations do not wish to be exempted from the duties and sacrifices imposed on the fighting peoples.

Naturally, there are many ways for an author to do his share in the event of national, or international, emergency. If his age, or physical disability, or other personal circumstances, prevent him from joining the Armed Forces, he may put himself at the disposal of a Government agency or try to be useful, as an individual artist, by elucidating and dramatizing the issues at stake in the war.

J.P. Priestley, for instance, has done more for England and for the United Nations in his capacity as a speaker and narrator than he could have accomplished by commanding a regiment. It is thanks to special war correspondents of John Steinbeck's caliber and integrity that the American public becomes gradually aware, not only of the strategic world situation but also of its moral and political aspects.

But there are other men of literary merits and reputation -- not less peace-loving and sensitive than their civilian colleagues -- who want to do more than can be done by the written or spoken word; who are eager to serve in a more direct, more prosaic sense; who are longing for the physical risk, the bodily community with the fighting men of their nation; whose paradoxical ambition it is to belong to the rank and file, after so many exceptional experiences and solitary adventures. There are authors, in short, who prefer a ~~soloir~~ soldier's anonymity to the more conspicuous efforts and satisfactions of their former career.

A writer in the U.S. Armed Forces has as much of a chance to become a successful soldier as has any other fellow of good will. Good will, of course, is indispensable: without it, you are lost in this man's army -- no matter what your professions used to be in civilian life. Whoever joins the ranks grudgingly, is in for a terrible time. But he who sincerely tries to make the best out of it, and to be as useful as possible, will find that the Army appreciates and encourages his efforts and intentions. An author in the Army -- although less valuable than a dentist and less glamorous than a baseball champion -- will be regarded and treated as a "regular guy," if he is "on the ball" (to use one of the most popular G.I. formulas).

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Some authors whose record or specific faculties seemed particularly valuable to the War Department, made quick and brilliant careers; Thornton Wilder, for instance, attained soon a major's rank, and Vincent Sheean was commissioned a Lieutenant Colonel. These are exceptions, however. In general writers, as anybody, have to begin from scratch and go up the hard way, if at all; this is true even of such celebrities as William Saroyan, who was having a tough time -- just another buck private.

If a writer-soldier is lucky, and wants a comparatively soft job, he may get into a Public-Relations Office, or be assigned to Special Services to conduct shows, Orientation courses, educational radio programs, and the like. If he is good at foreign languages, he may be used as an interpreter or prisoner-interrogator. Or there may be opportunities for him in the Personnel Department: his psychological training and innate interest in human characters should make him suitable for the important task of interviewing newly inducted men. In most cases, however, our novelist, ^{poet} ~~playwright~~, or playwright will have to wait pretty long for an assignment fitting his special talents and aspirations. Patience may be a great force and virtue in all ways of life; but in the Army it is indispensable. A sensitive character, caught in the slow-moving routine of so gigantic an organization, is likely to lose his mind, unless he commands a good deal of patience and modesty and also a certain humorous aloofness (which is compatible with eagerness and ambition). The first thing that must be understood by any newcomer in the Army is, that he has now become a tiny particle in a vast,

impersonal machinery, and will be treated as such. It is not easy to accept this fact and to adapt one's behavior to it -- especially for such incurable individualists as are most men of literary talent. It's not easy to become a soldier.

The basic military training is a tough proposition, for anyone brought up in this country and in this country's traditions. For Americans, in contrast to the Germans or Japanese, are by no means "born soldiers." They don't like to drill and to kill; they like to be civilians and pride themselves on being civilized. Ours is not an army of professionals -- fortunately not. This is a people's army -- consisting of men who would much rather do peaceful jobs and whose military efficiency is mainly due to their wish to make the war as short as possible, "to get it over with." That is perhaps why writers -- most of them pacifists by nature and conviction -- find it possible to endure the atmosphere of the American Army, to get along with American soldiers and officers, to join them in a feeling of common pride and solidarity.

Intellectuals in general, and free-lance writers in particular, are not much in the habit of sharing the toils and pleasures of the rank and file. Used to live in a more or less splendid isolation, they are always in danger to lose contact with the reality. All creative minds -- no matter how sincere and strongly emphasized their social consciousness -- have a natural, inevitable penchant for the Ivory Tower. But ~~there~~ on an Army post there are no such hiding places. Life in the barracks excludes privacy. You ~~can't~~ don't get away with aristocratic reservations. But you will be regarded as a "regular guy," if you are "on the ball" (to use a popular G.I. formula) and accept certain basic rules of common sense and military tradition. ~~Soldiers are not inclined to distrust or boycott anybody on account of his personal background or civilian profession.~~

American youth on the whole is remarkably tolerant -- apart, of course,

from certain dangerous local prejudices as the deep-rooted anti-Negro obsession in the Southern states. In general, however, a spirit of generosity and fair play happily prevails. The American boys, especially those in khaki, are not inclined to distrust or boycott anybody on account of his personal background or outlandish habits.

Certainly, a literary man -- an author of fancy stories or incomprehensible verse -- will seem a strange bird to a miner from Missouri or a farmer from Georgia. Yet the farmers and miners -- although forming the majority -- are not likely to gang up against their peculiar comrade, as long as he behaves himself and tries to be a good sport. A writer -- even one of European descent -- who takes his basic training together with a bunch of hicks and tough guys, will perhaps remain an outsider (his room-mates will call him "Professor"); but he will not be treated as a fool or an enemy. He will not be lonely, unless he deliberately isolates himself.

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But, fortunately, this disagreeable species is by means representative for the prevailing spirit. The stupid bullies are not popular. To be coarse and ignorant is not a recommendation in the American Army -- quite the contrary.

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terests or accomplishments are considered an asset rather than a disgrace. Even the illiterate are not without a vague, half-humorous respect for the vocabulary of science and poetry. It may be completely enigmatic to them, but they respond to certain suggestions it conveys, and which they consider "smart" and funny and not at all unpleasant.

This seems to me a very important point. In Germany, the uncultured people are implacable enemies of culture: they loathe and persecute it in all its forms. Not so in this country. Here, people don't dislike or scorn things they don't understand.

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