The Plattsburg Idea By A Plattsburg Rookie.

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To Paul West
With the
Holiday Wishes
of the
Author

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The Plattsburg Idea

Ever since the summer of 1915 more or less mention has been made of the "Plattsburg Idea." The purpose of this essay is to show what the "Idea" is. The "Plattsburg Idea" is a system of military training for men between the ages of eighteen and forty-five. The system is carried on in camps situated in several parts of this country. It received its name from the place where the system of training was first put into practice. These camps are carried on under the auspices of the War Department in the summer-time in terms of about a month each. The commanders are officers of the Regular Army. Every man who undergoes the training enlists for one term of instruction. The founder of the "idea" is Major-General Leonard Wood, Commander Eastern Department, United States Army. General Wood saw for a long time that in time of war the number of officers of our army and of our militia would not be sufficient to act as commanders of the vast number of men who would enlist as volunteers. For that reason Congress, upon General Wood's suggestion, appropriated money for the maintenance of civilian training camps. The object of these camps is to give in the shortest possible time the rudiments of a military education. I say the rudiments for the reason that one who goes there comes away with the feeling that he has learned only the very elements of a military training; and is convinced that the training of a soldier, much more an officer is a matter of months

if not years. The men in attendance at a term as a rule comprise an infantry regiment, the smallest division of tactical importance. Last July at Plattsburg, New York, there were four regiments. Each regiment is divided into three battalions; each battalion contains four companies. The organization of the company is into platoons, and from platoons into squads for the sake of convenience. The company has usually only one commanding officer, generally a lieutenant of the Regular Army. The non-commissioned officers of a company are men who have had previous military training.

The camps are carried on in at least one point in each military department. This makes a minimum of four camps. Some of these camps have four or five terms while others only two. The men live in large conical tents, a squad consisting of a corporal and seven privates to a tent. This is the identical manner in which all troops, Federal or State, live during summer maneuvers. The attendants of the camps wear the regulation summer uniform of the Army. After the rookie has been assigned to a company by the camp quartermaster at headquarters, he goes to the clerk at the head of his company street and is assigned to a tent. The rookie is then given his rifle, blankets, barrack-bag, canteen, poncho, First-Aid pouch, and bayonet. At a later date he receives his campaigning equipment consisting of a pack-carrier, pack, meat can, knife, fork, spoon, half a shelter tent, tent pins and intrenching tool. When he has safely

placed his equipment in the tent he reports along with the rest of the company for further instructions. Then they are shown how to take the rifle apart; and how to clean the various parts; where the canteen, bayonet, and First-Aid pouch are to be worn on the cartridge belt. The informal lecture is soon over and groups of "rookies" are seen seated on the ground busily engaged in dissecting their "pieces." Beside each man is a large sheet of paper where he places the parts of his rifle. With a rag moistened with gasoline he scrubs away on the metal parts to remove the cosmoline (vaseline) which covers all the inside of the "shooting-iron." It is not easy work but within a half hour each metallic part is shining, the piece is assembled and a contented look is in the face of the "rookie." Within a few days he is assigned to a definite squad. In the afternoon before "Retreat" the "non-coms" teach the rookies the "manual of arms," the various salutes and facings. At about 5 P. M. at "Retreat" the regimental bugler blows "Assembly." The company lines up in company formation. The roll is called by squads and the manual of arms is gone through. At the first note of The Star-Spangled Banner the Company Commander calls out "Comp'ny---y, Atten---tion!!" As the last notes die away the Commander calls out the First Sergeant. They exchange salutes. The Commander calls out

"Dismiss the company--y!" They salute again: the Commander goes to his tent. Announcements are read and after the commands "'Spection Arms," (Inspection Arms), "Port Arms," the company is dismissed by "Comp--ny Dismissed." In the evening after "mess" there is a conference lasting for about a half-hour. After this the citizen-soldier is free to do what he pleases until 10 P. M. At this time the bugler sounds "Call to Quarters" and a half-hour later "Taps" is sounded. At 5:45 A. M. or thereabouts "Reveille" awakens the "rookie." In ten minutes "Assembly" blows. At this call the company lines up fully dressed; the roll is called and the day's program is announced. The company is then dismissed for twenty minutes. At 6:25 A. M. "Mess" blows and in "column of squads" and at "rout step" the company swings off to the mess shack. Sometime during the second day the men undergo a physical examination.

The first week is given over to mastering the intricacies of infantry drill. At first "close-order" drill is taught. Its value lies only in the fact that it is now used as a means to teach the citizen-soldier team-work. When "Close-order" drill has been mastered, "extended-order" drill is then taught. It is in this way that troops are "deployed" on the battlefield. "Second year men" can if they please elect exclusive work in the Cavalry, Artillery, Field Artillery or any of the other "arms" of the service.

First year men are instructed in map reading, the "Manual of the Bayonet" and many other things. Five evenings a week conferences are held. These are of three different kinds: Regimental, Battalion and Company. At the Regimental conferences the camp officers are the speakers. Occasionally high officials such as the Secretary of War or Department Commander address the men. In the last two conferences there are lectures and then questionnaires by the men, the commanders of each group answering the questions raised.

At the beginning of the second week rifle instruction is commenced. The instruction consists of two distinct divisions: position and aiming drills, and shooting. The purpose of the position and aiming drill is to acquaint each man with the "feel" of his piece and the correct use of the sights. The latter is accomplished by having him fix his aim on some definite object. The drill is accomplished with no ammunition whatsoever. A feature of this drill is exercise in "trigger-squeezing." The importance of this lies in the art of "squeezing" the trigger easily yet steadily. The second division, shooting, is further divided into two parts: gallery practise and range work. The main purpose of the gallery practice is to instruct the "rookie" in the use of the army rifle. A sub-caliber, .22 caliber, rifle is used. The regulation rifle is .30 caliber. The gallery target is usually fifty or sixty feet away. When the company has completed the

gallery work the range practise is commenced. There the regular rifle is used with ranges of two-hundred, three-hundred and five-hundred yards. Besides shooting with the service rifle and ammunition each man is taught the duty of an official at the firing line; either that of scorer or telephone orderly or that of a member of a pit detail. In the latter the individual acts as mover of targets, target marker or telephone orderly. By the end of the second week work on the range is completed.

Drill and markmanship are not the only things which go to make up the soldier. He must also have a strong body to support him. Calisthenics are a means to this end. The purpose of calisthenics in the curriculum of the citizen-soldier is to render each man's body flexible. These are usually carried on two or three mornings for about three-quarters of an hour by an army officer detailed for that purpose. For a few days previous to the great hike which lasts a week or more, the time is devoted to campaigning. The regiment goes out on practice marches in full equipment. Sham battles are fought and camp-pitching practice is conducted. At the close of the third week the regiment marches out into the surrounding country for about eight days hiking and maneuvers. Each day a sham battle is fought on the march and a camp is pitched with conditions as near the actual as possible. Each evening battalion conferences are held. The tactical problem of the day is discussed, the one for the morrow is announced

and all important instructions for the next day are given. All cooking, transportation and like duties are performed by members of the Regular Army. All tentage, surplus baggage, food and water are transported by auto trucks. The encampment closes with the last day of the hike. At the close of the term each man returns in the Government property loaned him at the beginning of the term.

Now as the reader has seen the 'mill' in operation, the logical question is: 'What are the results of military training; of what practical use is it?' Military training teaches a man the value not only of having a sound body, but also of having a strong body. In addition military training gives a man an erect stature, an observant eye, and a steady hand. The physical benefits of a military training are not the only important thing: the moral benefits are just as essential. Military training takes the conceit out of a man by placing him in personal contact with other men from different parts of the country, and of different social standings, and where he can make his mark by merit alone. Military training creates loyalty within a man to his comrades, to his commanders, and to his country; and lastly obedience to authority, both civil and military. The results have been very aptly summed up by a 1915 Plattsburger who says, "In the end it comes down to these things pure and simple--to be physically fit to march any distance: to be able to shoot under the most trying circumstances--and to acquire the practice, the habit equal to second nature of obeying a few fundamental

commands. The rest is hardihood, courage, the will to fight, and the spirit of the team."*

Some one may ask, "Why is so much stress laid on military training?" If he will read our true military history, the history of defeats as well as victories, he will see that in each war the armies of the United States for the greater part were composed of men who had had little or no military training. Even the greater part of the officers were not of sufficient ability to act satisfactorily as commanders. Truly a sad state of affairs! One of the best things which President Wilson has said is in reference to military training. Here follow a few of his words. "We must depend in every time of national peril, in the future as well as in the past, not upon a standing army***but upon a citizenry trained and accustomed to arms." Further on he says: "It will be right***American policy***to provide a system by which every citizen will volunteer for training, may be made familiar with the use of modern arms, the rudiments of drill and maneuver, and the maintenance and sanitation of camps."* The practical demonstration of this system of military training is the "Plattsburg Idea."

*From "What I learned at Plattsburg" - Ralph W. Page, World's Work November 1915

*From "Message to Congress" - Woodrow Wilson, December 1914