

*The Economic
Problems of Army
Life*

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The Economic Problems of Army Life

BY HAROLD A. INNIS

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Never in the history of the world has there been such cause for gratitude; never in the history of the world have the words "Peace on Earth" been so pregnant with meaning; never before has Christmas been celebrated in the hearts of so many people with such whole-souled feeling as in the Yuletide season of this year. And yet through all the gratitude, through all the enjoyment of peace, through all the celebration of victory, runs a deep, vibrant note of determination, that such misery shall never again in this generation mar the lives of so many millions of men, that those who have made possible this peace shall not be forgotten, and that the trenches of autocracy which have been taken at such cost, shall be consolidated against all the enemies of democracy. This determination, manifesting itself in many places and from many voices, has thrown a white light on the details of the panorama, and no feature has been more strikingly revealed than the returned soldier. On him all eyes have turned; just as not long since, toward him all hearts have yearned. The new tasks to which he must set his hand, and with him, the whole world, are the completion of old tasks in which his part was dominant. One of these tasks, pressing for solution, is the economic reconstruction of the world; and to this task he comes equipped or ill-equipped with habits, with an outlook which must be studied in order to be successfully applied.

The economic problems of the soldier may be divided into two parts, the getting and the spending of an income, the one infinitely less troublesome than the other. Aside from remittances which reach many soldiers from more or less indulgent relatives, or from his own resources, the source of all revenue is the paymaster. Getting the income resolves itself into a struggle between the soldier and this despot of the pay office. The great day, whether in camp, hospital or on active service, is pay day, with its early release from drill, its alphabetical arrangements, its lineups, and then the long anticipated trip to the canteen, the friendly poker game, the "sharks" at banker, and the patronage of the crown and anchor board. Next to the bugle call for cookhouse, the most popular call is pay call, certainly it is not reveille. The

question which is more or less dominant in the minds of all soldiers is, "When's pay day?" and the most important part of his possessions is his pay book.

Usually pay day comes twice a month, and the amount of the pay is an algebraic unknown until after the paymaster has been saluted. The factors determining this unknown are, the amount of pay which has been assigned, the regulations of the higher authorities, the generosity of the paymaster, and the number of times for crimes in which the soldier has been caught. The amount of pay varies occasionally inversely with the number and diligence of military policemen. These varied forces make all forecasts of little avail, and the soldier concludes, under the most favorable arrangements, that the pay is insufficient, and the paymaster is at least not a gentleman. He may be many other things. In France the uncertainty decreases, so far as pay is concerned, and twenty francs every two weeks becomes a matter of routine with a bonus of sixty-five francs for Christmas.

Hospital life is characterized by fairly low pay, an average of ten shillings every fortnight. Always in case of leave, however, the paymaster loosens the purse strings. On discharge from hospital, usually on arrival in England or before going to France, after ten to eighteen months in France, the length of time varying with the character of the individual, leave is granted to travel anywhere in the United Kingdom, or, if in France, to some of the large cities, usually Paris. From ten pounds in England to fifty pounds in France, or in the event of Paris leave, 600 francs, are the amounts granted. Generally these are the items appearing on the wrong side of every paybook. On returning to Canada, all the items are carefully balanced by the Pay and Records office and signed by the soldier. For such a mess of pottage one would be tempted to sign away several birthrights.

The spending of this income is a matter relatively simple and relatively important. Many methods suggest themselves to a soldier. Some prefer buying several packages of cigarettes to last until next pay day, and spending the rest with less care. Others with an eye to large profits invest in a "hand" at poker. In the rare event of a large pay "stud poker" becomes a favorite game, while with meagre resources, such as one found in hospital, "rummy" at a penny a game is more popular. During periods of confinement to barracks, or on board ship, such pastimes as crown and anchor (in which, "the more you put down the more you pick up," or, as the dealer conscientiously adds, "sometimes"), and banker are found to be more satisfactory. All of these games under the rules and regulations of army life are illegal, but such "illegality" is dispensed with by a careful posting of

accomplices of the profits, so that approaches of the military police or of officers become known in time to conceal all evidence. Without attempting to justify any of these devices used to part a soldier from his money there is in all individuals an almost innate gambling disposition, though it is true there are variations among nationalities, the Scotch being good gamblers but poor losers, and the Swede an inveterate gambler, win or lose. Civilians are not immune from this gambling instinct, but there are other names and other games. The instinct seems no less in evidence whether one buys real estate or a ticket to a raffle, or as some married men claim, other articles.

The success of spending the receipts of one pay day satisfactorily until the next pay day is the test of the soldier's financial ability. Invariably after pay day the canteens are crowded, public houses and estaminets are liberally patronized—everyone spends liberally, but some more so than others. Some are “broke” the next day and are frequent borrowers, others, preferring to spread the allowance over the period between pay days, are less flagrant borrowers and more judicious financiers. And there are a few who save money over both pay days. It is much the same on leave,—the reckless, spending the money in the first few days and then returning to camp before leave is up; others, regulating the expenditure over the whole time; and some, having money left. The general recklessness is provocative of evils difficult to combat. The soldier arriving on leave at any of the chief cities has money and is looking for a good time. His motto becomes “It's a short life, but it's gay.” A class of parasites has grown up that gives him a “good” time and is well paid. The Y.M.C.A. and various other organizations have done much to enable the soldier to have a good time and at a reasonable cost.

The economics of army life is largely a matter of subsidy and the dangers and benefits of subsidy are in evidence. The remittance man has always suffered from a lack of that virile spirit of independence found among those who must fend for themselves. He is free from care; his food and his clothing are provided; he has few responsibilities, other than to have shaved, and brushed his buttons and boots every day. Moreover his individuality has been crushed by discipline. The hated subservience to officers, the detested persistence of obedience to orders, the monotony of the bugle, have all alike tended to crush the spirit of independence and individuality which have become so dear to him, since he has been bereft of them.

Life in the army is a series of “waits” in which all the innate instincts come to the fore. Time must be spent in some way, if not in gambling, if not

in playing “solitaire,” if not in telling stories, if not in the Y.M.C.A., then in doing nothing, and in being subject to the deadening influences of inaction. At any rate, time must be spent, and it becomes a question of spending it most advantageously,—in which the Y.M.C.A. and other organizations have been of inestimable value. The question of spending money is inextricably bound up with the spending of time.

Such are the influences which have been at work on the life of every soldier. Hampered by the habits which these influences have occasioned he is faced with a new task very different from the old work of the army. If he should find it difficult at first to accommodate himself to the new task, it behooves the world to have patience. He adapted himself to army life with the success which has made victory a fact, and this alone gives ample reason for the conviction that he will adapt himself to these new tasks with even more success, because of wider experience.

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *Economic Problems of Army Life* by Harold Adams Innis]