

"THE CAMP GORDON PLAN"

From out the melting pot of America's admixture of races is being poled a new American—a soldier man who, wearing the khaki and covered with the dust of the parade ground, is stepping forth into the ranks—file upon file of him—to make the world safe for Democracy, to tear the bloody hand of the Hun from the throat of civilization.

He is the "non-English-speaking soldier" who, along with his American-born brothers, has been selected through the draft to drive the overseas barbarians back into their lair.

And the wonder of it all is that but a scant three months ago it seemed that from this melting pot could be poured only a conglomerate mass of humanity, confused by a babel of tongues and disfigured by the all but shapeless mold into which it had been poured.

Yet now the mold is molding smoothly, symmetrically. Soldier after soldier is being turned out fit to fight for Liberty under the Stars and Stripes, mindful of the traditions of his race and the land of his nativity and conscious of the principles for which he is fighting.

A Wonder Story

And it has all been brought about by what is known in army circles as "the Camp Gordon plan"—whereby hangs a twentieth century story; a story to make the pulse quicken in these days when every mite contributed toward the winning of this world-war is an occasion for rejoicing; a story to gladden and reassure the anxious hearts of the foreign-born within our gates who have seen their sons taken by Uncle Sam and who in agony of soul have been wondering what he would do with them.

Above all, the story of a welding of diverse nationalities into a composite American type such as the so-called "melting pot" failed to pour forth in time of peace.

When the operations of the selective draft law began to turn its chosen men into the big Army camps, hundreds and then thousands of foreign-born males who came within its scope were found in the long lines admitted. Italians, Poles, Russians, Russian Jews, Lithuanians and Greeks marched side by side with the native-born sons of America. Armenians, Albanians, Syrians, Czechoslovaks, Jugo-Slavs, Scandinavians, Finns, and even Turks, answered this peremptory call to the colors. And not more than one in a hundred of them knew the English language well enough to understand the instructions necessary to make them first-class fighting men.

So, naturally, in the imperative haste of getting an army to France at the earliest possible date, these men of stalwart frame, of flashing eye and sealed lips were pushed aside, separated from the English-speaking draftees and placed together, a conglomerate mass, in a single section of each camp in what have since been designated as Development Battalions.

And there, perforce, they were left to themselves for a while—not by choice of those in authority, but simply because they presented a problem for which the answer could not be found on the spur of the moment. They were not neglected; on the contrary, they were well-housed, well-fed, well taken care of. But they were not immediately subjected to the soldier-making process to which the American-born draftees were introduced.

There were officers who could talk to some of them in their own tongues—but the officers were few, the tongues many and the men themselves thousands upon thousands. What to do with them, how to train them, how even to make them understand the few simple rules that any body of men living together must observe for the sake of mere cleanliness and good health—these were only a few of the salient points of the great problem faced by the military.

Here, let us say, was an Italian officer with some five hundred men under his command; he could make the Italians understand his orders, but the remainder of the five hundred were perhaps of as many as forty-one different nationalities! And there, again, was a Polish officer who could speak with the Poles and the Russians, but his instructions were worse than "Greek" to the Italians, the Syrians and the rest of the men in his command. And, remember, army officers who speak even one of these strange European tongues were so few that they were absolutely lost in the vast hordes pouring into the camps.

Dispiriting Circumstances

So, for week after week, these foreign-born draftees drifted along, dispirited and restless.

sentful, sullen. Many of them already were trained soldiers who had served in the armies of their native lands, and, more to the point, they had answered the call to the colors with enthusiasm because they saw in it a chance to fight not only the battles of their adopted country, but likewise opportunity to avenge some of the wrongs perpetrated upon their own countrymen in the past by the unholly Hun, the treacherous Austrian and the "unspeakable Turk." They had come into camp ready to fight, not to lie around and grow discontented and lazy as part of a badly disciplined rabble.

In their main ranks were men who did not want to fight; men who actually did not understand why they had been put into a military camp; men who were victims of pacifist and German propaganda; men who refused to be naturalized, refused to don a uniform, refused to even pick up a rifle and learn to drill.

Presently, race began to quarrel and bicker with race; old scores from the pages of history were dug up and reopened; and even within groups of men of the same race, factions—based upon politics or religion or upon some one of many points of difference the American mind simply cannot grasp—factions began to spring up and disrupt the scant harmony that did exist.

The problem became imminently terrible. Every effort was being made to solve it, and results were being obtained here and there, but not on the big scale necessary. The few officers equipped to handle portions of the mass worked day and night to bring some sort of order out of the chaos. But sheer force of numbers neutralized their valiant efforts.

Then came to the fore two officers with a plan which they believed would solve the problem, a plan so simple that now it seems it should have been obvious; but then, indeed, a plan which possessed all the elements of novelty and uncertainty.

This plan of theirs was to segregate according to their nationalities the foreign-speaking soldiers who could not understand commands, army orders and regulations in English. Instead of Poles, Russians, Italians and a dozen other races being jumbled, helter-skelter, into one battalion, they advised, the Poles should be formed into all-Polish companies and battalions; and so, too, with the Italians, the Russians and the other races.

Obstacles Numerous

A simple plan? Indeed yes—looking backward! But not quite so simple as it seems, even now. Its advantages were many; the obstacles to its execution all but legion. For example, to officer an all-Italian company the officers need be able to speak only Italian and English. But where were such officers, trained and capable, to be found? And, obviously, to find officers competent to command companies and battalions formed of every nationality present was an impossible task. So, there must be some officers who knew not only one language in addition to English, but many, many dialects, and—more than all else—knew the characteristics and idiosyncracies of the Jugo-Slavs, Czechoslovaks, Syrians, Armenians and other races. Where, again, could such men be found? They certainly were not in the old U. S. Army.

But the officers were not deterred by such obstacles. They decided to go ahead, with the proper authorization, and let each day be sufficient unto itself.

Camp Gordon, an infantry replacement camp near Atlanta, Ga., was selected for the experiment on a big scale. There were some four thousand non-English-speaking soldiers there who were all but running around in circles. Indeed, many of them were openly indifferent, discouraged, disaffected, rebellious. Not understanding English, many of them were confined to kitchen and police duty, working with pick and shovel, and they were objects of ridicule for the English-speaking soldier, who derived keen pleasure in calling them "Wops" and "Sheentes" and other terms of good-natured contempt. But few of them had been naturalized.

Many who truly hated the Central Powers were being held as enemy aliens solely because, not being understood, they gave the impression of being such. Others were out-and-out adherents of Bolshevik principles. Many were discontented because of their enforced isolation from spiritual and religious stimulus, believing that services at the Knights of Columbus butts were not Catholic because they were not Polish or Italian. Still others were real yellow dogs of the pacifist breed. And a large number

were physically unfit for active duty and were cluttering up hospital facilities when they might have been transferred elsewhere or discharged from service.

Into such a problem one officer sallied in two-fisted fashion, with cooperation from Washington. And he conceived the amazing idea of handling this "army neglected and ignored" not en masse, but individually! He did it, too. One by one the men were called before him and questioned. In several days he actually talked separately to 976 men! And spoke to them in either their own respective languages or in a combination of dialects—at all events he made them understand; and he, in turn, understood them! Thousands of complaints were noted, classified and either explained or adjusted. Each man was classified as to his nationality, loyalty, intellect, citizenship and fitness for military service.

An Illustration

A little pen-picture of what occurred (in various diverse forms) during this gigantic process of individual examination:

The Lieutenant, tall, fair-haired, boyish, despite his close-cropped mustache, slender, alert of eye and mien, is seated at a bench in one corner of a mess-hall. Ranged down the sides of the room are the men in line—some of them plainly fearful of what new ordeal they are to face, others sullenly belligerent, most of them stupidly resigned to whatever may come.

It is the turn of a young Russian, let us say, at the head of the line, to step before the Lieutenant. He makes no effort to salute in even imperfect fashion; he just stands and stares at his feet, at the floor, at the walls—anywhere except into the searching steel-blue eyes of the officer.

"Your name?" says the Lieutenant. He gives it—sullenly. He is refused to drill, to put on a uniform, to sign his naturalization papers. He is a pacifist.

"You do not believe in fighting—in force? You are not willing to be a soldier?" asks the Lieutenant.

He does not. Never—never should physical force be used. He cannot bear even the thought of killing a man.

"Ah! Never? You have a sister—yes? And she is still in Russia—yes? Suppose, my peaceful friend, you saw a German soldier rush upon her to assault her—what would you do? Would you use force—would you try to kill him even if you died yourself in the attempt?"

The Russian—magnificent of body, steady of eye—breathes hard and, despite his apparent effort to the contrary, hangs his head. No! He would not use force; he would not kill the German brute.

"What—would—you—do?" Slowly, word by word, with an interval between each of them, in a voice cold as steel, the Lieutenant makes his inquiry.

The man shifts his weight from one foot to the other. He fumbles with his bag, he tugs at his collar. Then he answers. He—he would try to reason with the Hun beast! He would endeavor to persuade him that he was doing a foul deed!

"So!" The Lieutenant has sprung to his feet, his eyes are ablaze with wrath and disgust, his arm is outstretched, accusing finger levelled in scorn at the miserable creature before him. "So! You would! Then you are nothing but a coward! A cowardly dog! You are afraid to fight! You are pretending all this just because you are afraid to face German bullets! Afraid to do your part in avenging the wrongs German soldiers have done to your native land—to other men's sisters there! You dare not risk your own skin! You are not a man! You are just a coward! That is all that's the matter with you!"

The Russian now is transformed. He, too, is alive with wrath. His eyes also are ablaze with anger. "I am not! I am not a coward!" he shouts. "I want to fight! I would kill a man who treated my sister—but—but—" And he breaks off, the tears streaming down his cheeks.

"But what—my friend?" asks the Lieutenant quietly. "Tell me. Tell me where you got this idea of being a pacifist? Who has been preaching it to you? Tell me what is troubling you. I want to be your friend, to help you—but you must be a good soldier, you must obey my orders—you must be a man! Tell me!"

And the man does. He really wants to fight. He was a soldier before he came to this country. He hates the Hun. But he is worried about his wife and child whom he has left at home—in New York, maybe.

What will become of them? He hasn't heard from them. How will they live? Will they starve while he is at war? And he has heard certain of his comrades talk about this thing called pacifism and conscientious objector—and they have told him that it will be the means of getting him out of the army so he can return to his wife and child.

Allotment Explained

Then the Lieutenant smiles—encouragingly, confidently—and takes him by the elbow.

"Listen, my friend," he says. "That is because you do not know. Haven't you heard yet that—" And quickly, but in detail, he explains how Uncle Sam will care for his wife and child while he is at war—how a part of his monthly pay will be deducted and an equal amount added by the Government, and then the whole sent to the good wife. He tells him all about the allowance and allotment plan, and about Government insurance and the various other ways by which the wife and child will be helped along by civilian organizations.

Result—another good soldier for Uncle Sam, satisfied, relieved of his worry, eager to serve.

"Next!" cries the Lieutenant.

And so it goes. The above is but one instance. They are legion, as are the issues involved.

Here a man is unruly because he doesn't want to drill and pretends to be suffering with rheumatism. All right; then he stands at attention in the sun for two hours—and he is soon cured. If real, his complaint is given careful treatment and he is not asked to drill until fit to do so.

There another is unwilling solely because he does not understand why he is to be made a soldier—actually does not know why we are at war. The officer explains it all to him, how he was fairly selected in the draft, how he will be well treated by Uncle Sam, how he now has an opportunity to prove himself worthy of his ancestors, to avenge the wrongs perpetrated upon them in the past, to play the part of an honored citizen of the new land of his adoption. And the man goes out a better man than when he came in—and a willing soldier of the United States.

In general, most of the objections to service are due to a lack of knowledge of the English language. Seventy-five per cent of the men, though in camps since last fall, had up to a short while ago, neither learned English nor the rudiments of being a soldier. But their troubles and complaints dissolve almost as the proverbial morning mists once they have an opportunity to talk with an officer who can explain broad American principles and answer their questions.

This classification at Camp Gordon resulted in the formation of three groups, as follows:

1. Development Battalion, composed of all physically fit men.
2. Labor Battalion, comprising the really disloyal and enemy aliens.
3. Non-Combatant Service, composed of the physically unfit for overseas service, but proficient in some trade.

Straightway the physically fit were assigned to what was known as the Second Development Battalion and two companies were formed, one composed of Slavs (the majority of them Poles) and the other a company of pure-blooded Italians; and each company averaged, including men and officers, 258 in personnel. Three officers were secured of Polish extraction and one of Russian for the Slav company, and two officers of Italian extraction for the Italian company, so that the men might be instructed in their native tongues. One officer of Greek extraction was also obtained to handle the Greeks.

Enthusiasm Supplants Discontent

The first week was devoted to lecturing on discipline and the Articles of War and to preliminary military training. Straightway fifty per cent of the discontent disappeared and real enthusiasm was evident.

And presently, too, another factor became apparent, a most desirable factor. For example, said one of the soldiers in the Slav company to one of the soldiers from the Italian company: "You Italians aren't real soldiers. We are!"

The Italian's eyes narrowed to gimlet points. "Sapristi! Is that so. Well you just watch us drill! You Slavs can't even march!"

And that started the ball rolling. Each company tried to outrun the other.

Result—both companies developed faster than the average American company of recruits would develop normally—and the infection spread throughout all the foreign-speaking soldiers in camp!



WEEK C
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