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COMMENT

Army Talk

ONCE THE INITIAL FEARS and apprehensions about going to the army had passed I began to consider my own peculiar problem: here was I, an unashamed non-racialist, going into an army dedicated to the preservation of the South African *status quo*. I had, perhaps more than most people, a reason for asking: "What will it be like?"

There was no time for entertaining my personal ideas for the first six weeks of basic training—nor much time for thought during the whole period—three months—of basic training.

After this phase had passed I arranged for friends to keep me supplied with *The New African* and *Contact*, and my links with democratic and cultural spheres were further strengthened by the *Classic* and *Black Orpheus*.

I remember an incident when a fellow-trainee picked up a copy of *New Left Review* and said to me, "How can you read such rubbish? There aren't even any pictures." An artistic friend had a copy of *Studio International*. This brought forth the gem, "Do you really buy this type of thing?"

However, in order not to appear too obvious, I bought *Dagbreek* every Sunday. I was, therefore, regarded more as a fool who wasted his money on newspapers rather than as a seditious threat.

More than anything I missed conversation. In the army one talks more than anywhere else. Political arguments are frequent—but they are always the typical arguments of the recognised white parties. And politics and religion are *officially* disallowed as topics for argument. This left sex and money as the only two subjects widely discussed—and since both were in short supply it became extremely monotonous.

IN THE ARMY I SAW PEOPLE being taught to accept others of different economic footings—and I found myself wishing, though not advocating, that this could be applied on a non-racial basis. But I saw another shameful practice; I heard vulgar comments

shouted at people of different colours. Whenever I was present I felt that I was being considered equally responsible because I was in uniform.

An interesting phenomenon, if we move from discussing the men to the instructors—officers and N.C.O.s—is that the old type is on the way out. This type considered it just a job—a job to be done well—and although they are professional soldiers and men who helped win the last war, they are not political. With them can be mentioned the young Afrikaner who joins in order to be employed, and who knows little about politics.

However, the new type of fanatic who believes in the glory of protecting the folks back home from rape and murder by Blacks ("it could be your sister or mother") is an increasing threat. His ranks are swelling. He is the type who, as actually happened, shouted on a shooting-range, in order to have his men shoot better, "Uhuru! Afrika vir die swart man."

Indeed they base much on being an example to the "un-educated millions" of Africa. It is strange that they find it so difficult being "civilised" White men. Getting familiar with a superior is called "getting White", a popular person is a "real white man," a lazy person is as bad (*sleg*) "as a kaffer." Much of the slang vocabulary is based on race.

A sergeant-major, observing that bed-making was not one of my innate talents, said, "Sies, man, my kaffer makes his bed better than that."

WHILE OTHERS AROUND ME echoed all the racialist jargon and drivel that was uttered I felt unhappy about it. Was I to pity them for being so gullible? Or would it be better to pity myself for being so helpless to prevent it?

I still fear that one day I may be expected to do something I would regret, that would be abhorrent to the ideals that I still hold—ideals that the army could not overcome because of the strength and sound logic of these beliefs. All I can do is hope that such a day never dawns—and support those who can help ensure it.

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