

# Comment

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to Emile-Jacques Dalcroze, who was professor at the Geneva Conservatoire and who is well known in French-speaking Switzerland for his popular songs, the most widely sung of which is *Et chantons en chœur le Pays Romand!* Eurythmy is a kind of gymnastics designed to develop body reflexes and concentration. It consists in making precise movements according to the duration of the notes played by a pianist. The response to a quarter note is a step, a longer note would require a step followed by a forward movement and interrupted. There was a Dalcroze school in Geneva. The two main schools at present are in New York and Laxenburg, Holland. But eurythmy is a wider subject than the mere Dalcroze method. It is, so I learnt from Robin Mitchell, an increasingly adopted therapy for maladjusted and defective children. One always learns something new. (PMB)

## COMMENT

### HAVE MERCY ON A SOLDIER'S HEART!

In the last fortnight of August, three men performing their annual military service collapsed and died from overstrain. I have details of the two latter cases. One of them involved a 40-year-old corporal of the 165th Infantry Battalion, who, on the day of his entry, had to walk with all his gear to the gathering centre for three quarters of an hour. The last stage of the climb was completed in a coach. A few hours later the unfortunate victim of these introductory efforts collapsed and died of an infarction before being brought to the hospital of Monthey. The second accident occurred on the same day in the course of a night patrol race in which a 40-year-old sergeant of the 264th Battalion collapsed

in his stride and died on the spot of a cardiac weakness.

Military accidents and deaths are inevitable in any army. There is no doubt that our Swiss Army authorities are taking all the measures they can to prevent accidents with the instruments of death which the rookies come to learn to handle. The fact that the Swiss army is a militia army, almost entirely manned by non-professionals, heightens the danger and one occasionally hears of men being seriously wounded by unscrewed grenades blowing up in the pockets of their combat suits, of others being shattered by uncleared mine-throwers or burnt by flame-throwers. In the course of practice assaults against a hill strongly defended by wooden targets, a bullet rebounded on a Geneva infantryman five yards away from me. His helmet had a lovely dent which he could show off at inspections.

But death by mishandling of weapons can usually be controlled by the fact that weapons behave in a predictable way, whatever else one might say about them. The human body is not endowed with such a safe predictability. The purpose of the Swiss militia is to keep the populace as fit for fighting as possible by plunging it into military life at regular intervals. But being fit for fighting doesn't only mean knowing how to handle guns and grenades, it also requires a physical condition able to withstand the stress of prolonged fighting which would be faced in real warfare. Military repetition courses may therefore not be a rest cure and have to tax the physical hardiness of a people's army. In the course of wide-scale manoeuvres in which the combined forces of Neuchatel and Geneva successfully defended the passes of the Jura against the invading Bernese, we were made to trudge in the snow for five days and nights—as good an imitation of the real thing as one could wish!

The men who enter annual military service are supposedly fit, because they have proved this by accomplishing recruit schools and other previous military stunts. The weak hearts are rapidly screened out. In the case of Colombier, in the grand château where the infantry of Geneva has to do its basic training, recruits are made to sprint 60 yards on the day of their enrolment. The erratic thumping of the hearts of about a tenth of them are a welcome ticket back to the family. During the next days, all recruits have to plod up a two-mile ascent to the firing range of Bôle under a blazing sun. This exercise prunes off another batch of weak hearts. The last weaklings are nipped away during the first night exercises, which is the first major test of physical endurance. With all this sifting, a 20-year-old youth who has accomplished four months of hard military effort can normally be said to be free of a deficient heart.

But between the vigour of the

young man released from basic training and the paunchy stomach of the professional man, who, in his greying forties must accomplish his last *Landwehr* course, there may be an intermission of stress, overwork, over-eating, cholesterol perfusion and family worries. A man called in his forties may not be fit for service, even though his military booklet may be free from all inscriptions indicating ill health. The only way of preventing the frequent recurrence of heart failures during repetition courses would then be to precede all of them by a thorough medical check-up. This of course would cost money and time, but money is a fair price to pay for human life.

The cause of these men's deaths was perhaps not physical strain as such, but the suddenness with which it was imposed. The first of the two cases mentioned above was that of a man who died less than ten hours after putting on his uniform. Whatever the results of the enquiry, it appears that the human machine isn't maintained with sufficient care by the intendants. Account has got to be taken of the times, as people nowadays lead rather unhealthy lives.

If other heart accidents were to occur, one could well imagine the ensuing mass psychosis. Both officers and men would dread the least exertion. The officers would be afraid of taking the responsibility of prolonged efforts and order lengthy pauses after every mile of marching, or transport their delicate men in upholstered coaches. The common soldier would keep an anguished ear on the vagaries of his heart and stand transfixed in utter anguish at the first twinge inside his chest, fearing that his life pump might suddenly stop.

Weeding out the weak hearts before the annual effort is better than letting coronaries snap suddenly during the armed storming of a mound. All those valiant men liable to puff themselves irremediably out in the Army could still be useful to society. They are worth keeping alive. (PMB)

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