

Casualties

GEOFF RYAN, FROM "SOWING DRAGONS", 2001

I had always believed that casualties must accompany any good thing, the better the thing, the higher the casualties'

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God will not look us over for medals, but for scars. The apostle Paul boasted that he carried on his body the marks of Christ, and we often bandy about such talk in The Salvation Army. It fits in with our military persona; it is part of our lore.

But I suppose, for all that, that most of us concentrate more on the medals than the scars. The medals that we sport are usually our more obvious victories: that outstanding convert (termed in days gone by 'trophy of grace'); the growing corps; the early promotion; the successful musical tour, etc.

But what about the scars?

If, in the past, I did think of them at all, it was in a cavalier, macho way. In my mind's eye stood the old legionnaire at the end of the day – unbowed and firm, bleeding here and there, tunic torn, bloodied sword in hand, the knotty tissue of old scars livid amid the shocking scarlet of fresh wounds, with defiance blazing in his eyes. A rather romantic and unrealistic picture.

What I had failed to take into account, what I did not know, was how much the wounds would hurt; how much they would burn and sting, how the scar tissue would throb with a dull, incessant pain, how it would remain undimmed with the passage of time; how the layering of scars can kill the nerve-endings and cramp the joints and can make one bow low in pain and exhaustion, barely left with any will to resist.

One of the surprises of my officership has been the number of casualties among my own troops. Oh, I knew that there would be those who would fall away (the seed on stony soil and all that), but I cannot honestly recall

anyone telling me just how skillful Satan would be. It was rumoured, but nothing much of a specific nature was said.

I suppose in my training days in Canada we concentrated, like many churches in the West, far more on evangelism than anything else. The battle at home rages outside the church, the challenge is how to get people to come to church, and then, once we manage to get them there, how to get them saved.

It happens rarely enough, so not a lot of thought is put into what should take place afterwards.

For my present appointment I arrived thus deployed and realised, not long after taking up my position facing the enemy, that the enemy was already past me, and I was holding the wrong weapons, in the wrong trench.

Getting people to the corps proved not much of a problem. Getting them 'saved' deceptively simple.

What next?

I had been trained as a commando, focused to parachute in, kick down the doors of spiritual apathy, deftly grab the sinner around the waist, and quickly back out of the room holding Satan and his minions at bay with my drawn sword - in and out like the SAS.

God's Shock Troops!

The Salvation Army!

But here I was, in and out of the room in a matter of spiritual micro-seconds, with the freed hostages on hand.

Salvation had occurred.

Discipleship was needed.

I was trained to swoop but what was now needed was that I lead a campaign. A long, long march through hostile territory which required that while I continue to swoop and fight battles, I also train and preserve my fighting force.

The campaign is well under way. Fighting has been continuous. Reinforcements have arrived as new hostages have been liberated, trained and sent to the front. But

the casualties are mounting. The body count is high on both sides, and I must confess it's starting to take its toll on me.

Satan in front, coming head-on, I could handle. I was trained for that. I had on all the necessary armaments. But he never attacks head-on. He comes as a sniper. And what an unerring shot he turns out to be!

Each new year that the pilgrimage continues, that I lead my troops on their campaign of faith and salvation through occupied and hostile territory, I note the body count.

I am usually taken by surprise. Some are killed outright, shot through the heart so suddenly that the pain is short and sharp. At least it's over quickly.

Far worse, however, are those who are first wounded, and then die slow deaths that are agonising for the rest of us, and something akin to murder for me.

Frantic efforts are made to resuscitate the wounded, while keeping one eye on 'damage control' (for the morale of the rest of the troops). So far I have invariably ended up sitting and watching the seemingly inevitable death.

And then, all the guilt floods in-the guilt of a Salvationist unable to save. *He saved others-but he can't keep them! He can't save his own*

Satan is a marksman.

He knows whom to pick off and how. The ones I never expected, the strongest, the most committed, the most talented and skilful the ones I was closest to, the ones who, if you had asked me to point out my best soldiers, my most valuable warriors, I would have fingered them-these are the ones he has started on.

Not all have fallen, but enough. Far too many.

I remember lying awake late one night, having so far spent the better part of it in bitter and impotent anger, shaking my fist at God and Satan and myself in turn.

We had lost another one - a true warrior; an evangelist who had brought scores to the corps; a local officer and a candidate. A friend. Gone. Spiritually dead. Another casualty. No matter how hard we and the rest of the troops had tried, in the end it hadn't been enough.

The rearguard action had raged for about three months and I was exhausted. But worse, I knew that we had lost again.

It dawned on me that maybe because we sing so much about victory and triumph, we find it hard to acknowledge just how often Satan actually wins. Sure, the war is not in doubt-but it's the battles that take their toll. And no matter how many new engagements we win, even if the intake of troops to date far out-weighs the casualties, still it hurts, and the scars remain-for life, as I now know.

Soldiers I have plenty of, but true warriors are rarer. They're harder to find. I will never have enough of them.

Now, as I rejoice over every battle won, and every new soul captured, I also carefully study the penitents at the mercy seat on Sundays.

I attentively scan the recruits preparing for soldiership.

I pore over the names in my soldiers' roll and wonder and pray and worry.

I look with a more practised eye, more cautious, perhaps, praying that the Lord will guard my heart from hardness and cynicism, but also tempering my joy with a realism and healthy respect for the destructive capabilities of my adversary.

I know that some of them will fall, and some will desert.

And I also know that there is little I can do about it.

The casualties of war.

I now understand Paul when he cried out: *Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn?* (2 Corinthians 11: 28,29).

And I remember that Alexander the Great had to quit at 33 on the edge of India because his troops would not, *could not*, campaign any further.

And I consider that this secret of the need to *continue* the campaign might, in the end count, be one of the more valuable skills I can learn as an officer.