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Walking the walk

By Alan Sharpe
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"Put all your kit (equipment) on the deck!" yells the instructor. "Stop acting like a bunch of brown-hatters (homosexuals) and start switching on! (thinking)," shouts another.

To the civilian, each instructor looks frighteningly fit and good at what he does. He also speaks a language the recruit has never heard before.

The British Royal Marines need nine months to turn civilian men into fully-trained fighters (there are no women in the corps). When he first steps off the train at the Commando Training Centre in Devon, the civilian is met by the training team and the person who appears to be in charge assure the new arrivals that he is reasonable and fair.

"I'm Sergeant Madsen, your TL (training leader)," he says, "and I'm the one who is going to turn you from nods (recruits) into bootnecks (Royal Marines). I'm a wazzer egg (great guy) and a good run-ashore (night on the town). You play ball with me and I'll hit you over the head with a cricket bat."

The civilian may not realize it yet but he has just discovered the language of the Royal Marines. In nine months, if he is not part of the 70 per cent who fail commando training, he will have mastered him.

The civilian now has short hair, wears a uniform and the training structures his life, but these conditions he expected. It takes more time to get used to the new way he must speak.

He is now in "The Corps" — one of the Royal Nova's soldiers. Even on dry land, nautical terminology is mandatory. He sweeps the deck, not the floor. He goes to the galley (kitchen) at scan time (meal time) with his yaffling spanners (knife, fort, etc.) in order to get Harry toppers (very full). He sleeps in his pit and, in the morning he no longer gets dressed, he puts on his rig.

Surrounded daily by the language, the recruit finds it the only method of communication. The idiosyncrasies of the Royal Marines must be accepted. To do otherwise is folly.

What is this in the gash can, Sharpe?" asks the instructor (a gash can is a shallow chrome garbage can used in barrack rooms).

"It's garbage, Sergeant," replies Sharpe.

"Give me 20 good ones (push-ups), Sharpe. Now, what is this in the gash can?"

"Oh, it's gash, Sergeant," says Sharpe, panting.

"And what is it doing in the gash can, Sharpe?"

This is the puzzling part. "Well," says Sharpe, his mind racing, "it's gash . . . so I put it in . . . the gash can, Sergeant."

"We don't put gash in the gash can, Sharpe. It has to be gleaming-spankers-clean every time I walk into this room; do you understand?"

"Yes Sergeant," says Sharpe, lying.

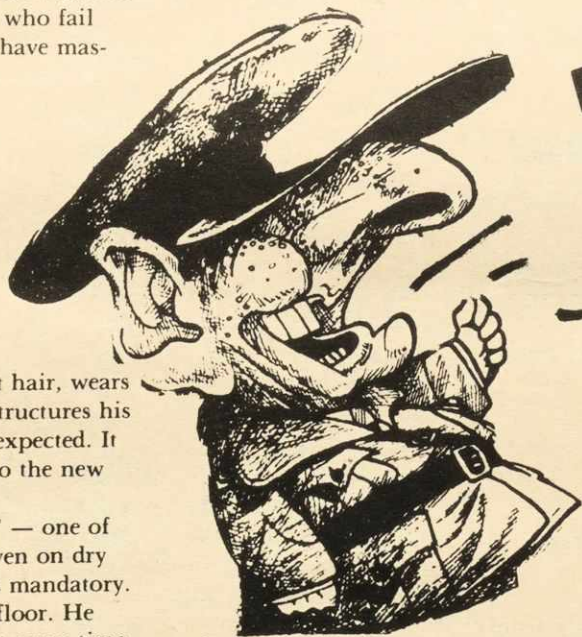
Eventually, the recruit understands that his life is not his own anymore. He moves closer to becoming someone who

Upon completing training, the Royal Marine is posted to a commando unit of 800 men where he generally serves as a rifleman in a section of eight. The language no longer serves to shape him but to keep him apart from civilians and other services.

In the Falklands, he dehumanizes the Argentine enemy by saying he is going to "frag some spics" with fragmentation grenades. In Northern Ireland, when an IRA terrorist blows himself up, he calls it a "home goal", after the soccer phrase for players who score into their own net by mistake.

While he is in the Corps, the Royal Marine's language makes him feel part of a small, tightly-knit community of like-minded men. They dress, act and think the same. He is part of the team. He travels the world. He is paid well. He is admired by his parents, respected by other armed services and feared by his enemies — as long as he remains "inside," walking the walk and talking the talk.

To most, leaving the Corps, or "getting outside", is unpleasant. Back in



Talking the talk

no longer thinks like an autonomous individual but like a Royal Marine.

By deciding to stay, the recruit now identifies more with the Royal Marines than with civilian life. He calls those out of uniform "dumb civvies," calls a night on the town a "run-ashore", and when going out with his buddies ("oppos") to meet women ("parties") he talks not of picking them up but of "going trapping".

He no longer just dresses and talks like a Royal Marine, he begins to feel like one.

But unlike defense intellectuals and nuclear war strategists, the Royal Marine uses little abstraction to distance himself from the reality of war.

He refers to enemy gun positions as being "destroyed by friendly (his) artillery fire," not as having been taken out. When artillery falls on the ground, he does not call the spread of bombs the footprint but "the killing area". Innocent civilians killed in the line of fire aren't collateral damage, they are "civilian casualties."

civilian life, the ex-Royal Marine begins putting his feet on the floor, not the deck, and starts dating women, not trapping girls.

All ex-Royal Marines quickly stop using the old language. But none, at least none very quickly, can stop thinking the way they used to, for they have mastered the language and the language has mastered them.