DESERTER: A Hidden History of WWIIby Charles Glass was published in paperback 28 April 2014, William Collins, £10.99. Reviewed by Elayne Jude In North Africa in 1942, Auchinleck, Middle East Commander in Chief, faced desertion from the Army on a scale he was unable to cope with. Many ran rackets in the Egyptian black market, hijacking and reselling vital military supplies, including to Zionists in Palestine - gangs like the Free British Corps and the Dead End Kids. There were insufficient RMPs to cope.

Auchinleck aplealed to the Cabinet for restoration of the death penalty as the only convincing punishment and deterrent for deserters. His request was kept secret from the public, which, according to private Cabinet papers of the time, already took a dim view of army command. Churchill demanded more information. Grigg, a career civil servant appointed by Churchill as Secretary of State for War, argued in a Cabinet minute:

“to justify a modification of the present law we should have to produce facts and figures as evidence that the British soldiers’ morale in the face of the enemy is so uncertain…any such evidence would come as a profound shock to the British public and our Allies and as encouragement to our enemies.”

Or, as he put it privately to Churchill:

‘If legislation is necessary, the facts and figures must be serious. But if they are serious, we can’t afford to tell our friends or our enemies”.

The law remained unchanged. Churchill dismissed Auchlinleck, making way for the appointment of Montgomery, who raised overall morale and took a far more pragmatic approach. The delivery of new American tanks, and the failure of the Axis to exploit its victory at Tobruk and push forwards, turned around the Egyptian campaign. Many deserters returned. There were too many to court martial and imprison. The 8th Army needed seasoned fighters. The special survival skills of successful longterm absconders who’d lived out in the desert were put to work in newly created SAS, or the Long Range Desert Group.

Some desertions were more calculated than others. At this stage of the war, a quarter of combat injuries were reckoned to be psychological. John Bain, a young working-class Gordon Highlander, one of three case studies in Charles Glass’ book, simply wandered off the battlefield in something akin to an out of body experience, a state of utterly exhausted disassociation. For Bain, the immediate trigger was not carnage and slaughter of his unit, but the sight of his own side, his friends, looting the bodies of their fallen comrades.

In his dreamlike state, Bain was swiftly picked up, sentenced to three years penal, and

incarcerated in the British Mustafa prison outside Alexandria. His experience there was pretty much what you might expect in terms of diet, violence, and inane punishments. The prison guards who taunted and brutalised their charges had never served at the frontline. Inmates were permitted to write one letter home each fortnight, to be censored by the commandant. Bain invented a wholly fictitious family and address, and took pleasure in using as many long words as he could muster, to force the Commandant to use the dictionary.

Bain was released from Mustafa early, to make up the numbers for the Normandy offensive. The Brits had simply run out of good men, and the infantry were at the bottom of the recruitment pecking order, picking up whoever was passed over by everyone else. In Normandy, Bain was more unnerved by an encounter with a fellow soldier he'd known earlier, than by the grislier aspects:

'…A huddled figure whose sobbing and choking voice was unrecognisable…The boy was crying like a baby for his mother. The cook, filling Bain's mess tin with stew, looked at the babbling soldier with disgust and said, "I know what I'd do with the f**ker, and it wouldn't be send him back to Blighty"…The trembling boy haunted him for hours, because he shared the cook's contempt and felt "even a stab of sadistic hatred". A more frightening thought was that he was witnessing something of himself.'

The author is brilliantly successful at reaching and sharing insight into the conduct of the war through the stories of these protagonists whom he rescues from obscurity, returning the history of world events to the ownership of the Tommy.

'To commandants, decisive moments came with the capture or loss of high ground, offensives, retreats and massive battles. To infantry soldiers like John Bain, significant events were personal; surviving a mortar barrage, finding shelter in a building or ditch, eating hot food and losing a friend. "

Support of the individual was sacrificed by military planners for the efficiency of logistical delivery. The price was paid in the perhaps avoidable loss and alienation of those individuals, with an ultimately detrimental effect on their units and regiments. The chosen methodology of replacing men as individuals within units, separating them from their buddies, made logistics easier, but isolated the men, making them more vulnerable to mental breakdown. Bain, a war poet who went on to make a career as a writer, speaks often in his writing of the terrible loneliness he felt, in North Africa and in Normandy.

…He could conceal

his terror till his Company was called

to face real battle's homicidal storm.

He chose desertion, ignominy and jail.

After the mass desertions of the North African campaign, the British army command responded with a recognition of the seriousness of 'battle fatigue', attaching psychiatric assistance to its personnel. But still, by the war's end, 200 000 deserters were at large in UK. Without papers, they could not operate within legitimate society. Many had no choice but to exist on its criminal margins. The threat this posed to public order, and the cost, and public unpopularity, of police operations to recapture the men, propelled Churchill, returned to office in February 1953, to declare an amnesty. The manhunt was over.

John Bain and the British experience is only one aspect of Charles Glass's book, just re-issued in paperback. The American experience, which space precludes me from exploring, make up the bulk of its content. It shares with the British chapters a breathtaking reach and depth of research, illuminated by the personal. Unlike the army, Glass never loses sight of the human.

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