



By Joe Byerly

Recently, I read Jean Lartéguy's [*The Centurions*](#). The novel follows a group of French paratroopers through their tour in Vietnam, time as POWs, their return to France, and their subsequent deployment to Algeria.

Although it was written 40 years ago, it's full of powerful lessons about war and leadership that remain valid today. One of my favorite passages from the book is the description of two armies:

“I’d like France to have two armies: one for display, with lovely guns, tanks, little soldiers, fanfares, staffs, distinguished and doddering generals, and dear little regimental officers who would be deeply concerned over their general’s bowel movements or their colonel’s piles: an army that would be shown for a modest fee on every fairground in the country.

“The other would be the real one, composed entirely of young enthusiasts in camouflage battledress, who would not be put on display from whom possible efforts would be demanded and to whom all sorts of tricks would be taught. That’s the army in which I should like to fight.”

As I read these words, I couldn’t help but reflect on our Army today, wondering which military we represent: The one on display or the one for fighting. Are the leaders we invest in and bring up through the ranks the ones who contribute and excel at the army on display or can they excel in the requirements of the modern battlefield? Do we place great value in adherence to regulations, customs and courtesies, or do we promote a culture of war fighting? Do we train our formations for the war we want to fight or the wars we are fighting now? I honestly don’t know the answer.

Below are some of the other passages I thought worth highlighting. I hope in reading this post, if you haven’t already, you will pick up a copy of [The Centurions](#) and think through the type of soldier and leader you want to be.

SOPs and regulations will only get you so far...

“Look here, Colonel, I’ve noticed your men don’t wear steel helmets. The regulations...”

“The regulations are very well, Colonel, but they overlook one important point.”

“What’s that?”

“That we’ve first got to win. Now no one can fight properly and win while lumbering about the mountains in the month of July with a heavy helmet on his head. I’ve given my men orders to leave their helmets behind at the Camp des Pins, but to take two water bottles each.”

When war comes into conflict with tradition

“In modern warfare all those rites were ludicrous; it was not enough to be well-born, smart and clean; first of all you had to win.”

The need for leaders to understand the nature of war.

“All warfare is bound to become political, Colonel, and an officer with no political training will soon prove ineffective. Frequently the word ‘tradition’ only serves to conceal our laziness.”

The reality of military life

“...Military life fits in with a certain form of laziness. The existence of an officer is divided very unequally between moments of hardship, fatigue, and danger and longer periods of inactivity and leisure. In those moments of supreme effort an officer can be driven, despite fear, hunger and weariness, to accomplish extraordinary feats which will turn him, but only for an instant, into someone greater, more disinterested and more dauntless than other men. During periods of inactivity he moves with the slowness of a drowsy bear in a little closed world of his own. All effort is banned from it, or is anyway extremely restricted by regulation, ritual, and custom.”

The type of men and women we need for modern war

“For our sort of war you need shrewd, cunning men who are capable of fighting far from the

herd, who are full of initiative too -sort of civilians who can turn their hand to any trade, poachers, and missionaries too, who preach but keep one hand on the butt of their revolvers in case anyone interrupts them.....or happens to disagree.”

On Leadership

“The men must have their leaders under their skin; no, I don’t know how to explain it, but there ought to be a soft of close communion of hardship, danger, and death. Each time the least of his soldiers is killed, the leader ought to feel he has lost something of himself; it ought to hurt him until he feels like screaming. I don’t believe in human cannon-fodder; I’m even against it, very much against it.”

On Professional Reading

“I don’t know what Verdun was like. But I’ve read some books, any number of books. I don’t say what I read; that’s my secret. I read and learn on the sly. A man can’t discover everything on his own. Then one fine day the brass goggle with surprise at what I tell them and believe that I’ve thought it all out myself. It was either in Caesar, or else in Clausewitz.”

Leadership and Loyalty

“I don’t agree at all with Raspegy’s methods of command. It commits one too deeply. Just because I send a private soldier to his death, I don’t feel I’m first obliged to ask him into the drawing room for coffee and listen to him *talking* about his mother or airing his views on the world. Units like the one commanded by your Raspegy are liable eventually to turn into sort of sects which will no longer fight for a country or an ideal, but only for themselves.”

Fighting on the outskirts of the Empire

“What passed through the minds of the Roman centurions who were left behind in Africa and who, with a few veterans, a few barbarian auxiliaries ever ready to turn traitor, tried to maintain the outposts of the Empire while the people back in Rome were sinking into

The Centurions: 10 Passages that Will Make You Reflect on War and Leadership

Christianity, and the Caesars into debauchery.”

If you want to learn more, check out [The Centurions here!](#)

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