

Old Soldiers

By Julian Scutts

A surprise when reading the obituary column

Ratta-tat-tat - ratta-tat-tat

The pulse of machine-gun fire was still throbbing in his ears, battering his eardrums, when Brigadier-General Barnes-Fothergill awoke that morning. Not that there was anything so special about that. Recurring dreams are quite common.

Barnes-Fothergill had only caught the tail-end of the first big show, back in the days when he was only an eighteen-year-old. Even so he had experienced one or two nasty scrapes. Once he and

several comrades were out on night patrol, when a flare went up. Instead of doing the proper thing and freezing, a couple of men ran for cover. The patrol was fired on by an enemy machine-gun nest. Two were mown down instantly and a couple more were wounded in the legs... Barnes-Fothergill managed to dive for cover into a shell crater and got away completely unscathed. There he remained for an hour or so before sneaking back to friendly lines before dawn.

The retired brigadier-general looked out of his bedroom window upon a mournful prospect. A dense, sallow fog submerged every shape and contour.

Not even the branches of the nearby elm in the garden could be seen.

Being somewhat absent-minded, the old soldier was often unable to locate articles of clothing in the morning. Last thing at night he was wont to undress wherever his whims dictated - in the bathroom, in the hall or landing, in the kitchen, indeed in any of the seventeen rooms that were part of his rambling mansion.

To complicate matters further, Miss Alley, the housekeeper, had a rather tedious habit of tidying up after him with such ruthless efficiency that items of clothing were often spirited away for hours, sometimes even days and weeks, before resurfacing somewhere or other. Miss Alley, who lived as a tenant in what had been the gamekeeper's lodge, had the run of the mansion and would usually have completed her tidying and mopping up operations by the time the brigadier-general roused from his sleep. At such time she was normally doing shopping in the village or having coffee at the vicarage. She would be back at the mansion between half-past ten and eleven to make breakfast. This meant that the brigadier-general would often have to mope around the mansion in his shroud-like night-gown, make his own tea or continue looking for lost articles of clothing, muttering: "It was never like this when Smithers was my batman."

As he descended the staircase that morning, the creaky boards seemed to creak more loudly than they usually did. In the hall he noticed that the grandfather clock had stopped in the night, around midnight evidently. The Times was on the coffee-table in the lounge, an indication that it was later than half-past nine, the time it was usually delivered. Miss Ayley must have placed it there for his benefit to allow him to peruse its pages before breakfast.

The brigadier-general thought about making himself a cosy pot of tea before settling down to a good old read. But no, first he would have a dekko at the obituary column, unquestionably the greatest imperative of the mid-morning period. He turned the light switch, it being rather dim in the room.

Drat! Not another power cut. Damned nationalisation. But as there was just enough light to read by, he would bother with technicalities later. Yet there was balm in Gilead, now for the obituary column!

A certain Very Reverend Ewart-Fraser of Perth headed the list. Apparently he had written voluminously on such doctrinal matters as Perseverance and the Perfection of Saints and had otherwise distinguished himself in the penning of numerous works of devotional

value. Second place was claimed by one Lord Albert Dick Turner of Sidcup, who had

been made a life peer during Harold Wilson's period of leadership. An eminent scientist came third. But then! The old soldier could hardly believe his eyes, but there it was in black and white: "General Arthur Stanmore-Phipps".

"Poor old Stanners, " the all but incredulous brigadier-general muttered to himself, scratching his left ear-lobe. "Copped it, eh? Funny, gave him a buzz not long ago. Said he was feeling a bit under the weather. How we used to chide each other on who would be first to snuff it!"

The brigadier-general raised a chuckle when he read one of the more absurd purple passages in the laudation. The bit that really made him snort was this one:

"It is indisputably and unchallengeably true that the General possessed an immensely impressive mastery of tactics as well as unfathomable reserves of courage, both moral and physical. Nowhere was proof of these virtues more evident than in the African theatre."

The brigadier-general was one of the few insiders who knew the true story.

He knew what lay behind the miracle, so-called, of "Ain-esh-Sheikh."

Stanners, was in command of a light armoured division at the time, had completely lost his bearings. In fact, he was a good twenty-five miles due west of where he thought he was, virtually

out of ammo and petrol too. He then made out a none too well camouflaged supply dump near a small oasis. He mistakenly took this to be manned by Brits. When the Germans, caught with their trousers down, saw British armour heading straight for them at full throttle, they could only conclude that a hitherto ingeniously concealed spearhead, doubtless packed with all the punch Monty could muster, was appearing before their very eyes like the tip of a deadly iceberg. Having been under the impression that the supply situation would not give the British the necessary range to mount an attack, the German commander was totally unprepared to repulse Stanner's advance, and in panic ordered a retreat.

The dust thrown up by the German track vehicles gave away their position to our RAF and long-range gunner chappies, and there was a helluva rout.

Fortunately for Stanners and his men, the vehicles under his command ran out of fuel before entering a defensive mine-field. Fortunately indeed, because these would not only have had the mines to contend with but also with no small measure of "friendly fire".

Piety and a sense of fairness had just about prevented the brigadier-general's half-suppressed chortles from breaking out into a loud guffaw, but then ... as his eyes wandered down to the bottom of the obituary column, a much greater shock than any he had previously sustained awaited him in the heading:

"Brigadier-General Reginald Barnes-Fothergill".

Once the brigadier-general had recovered somewhat from the initial impact of so strange a recognition, it dawned on him that he was the victim of a most unpardonable injustice. Stanner's life had received about three times as much column space as than devoted to his own, and nowhere in the obituary was there the slightest mention of his brilliant excellence in the martial arts, his notable feats in the military theatre, his exemplary devotion to duty. Had not Eisenhower praised his cool-headed caution in Normandy and his judicious restraint and timing in the Ardennes. And Churchill, had he not commended his alertness to danger during the retreat from Dunkirk, the speed with which he got his men out of the Pas de Calais? Compared to such deplorable omissions, the mere fact that he had been included in the obituary column dwindled in importance to that of a mere clerical error, the most venial of aberrations. And then that insipid end!

"The Brigadier-General, who had led a secluded and uneventful life in recent years, passed away during the early hours of January 19th at his Surrey home. No flowers."

He dialed The Times, but the lines were dead. He tried one or two other numbers, but with no greater success. With such an affront weighing on his mind, he just had to get through to somebody and let off steam. Hardly conscious of what he was doing, he nervously fingered the dial as though under the force of habit. This time he did get through to somebody. A voice at the other end answered in a thin and rather odd timbre:

"General Arthur Stanmore-Phipps, V.C., O.B.E., speaking."

"You, Stanners, I thought you were dead!"

"You, Dodder-Guts! But surely you've gone for a burton, too! Been trying to get through to The Times all morning, but the line was dead. Scuse, old man, think somebody's knocking at the door."

The brigadier-general waited and waited, but the general did not return to resume the conversation.

Just as he decided there was no point in holding the line any longer, he heard a sound...

Ratta-tat-tat, ratta-tat-tat ...

Who would come knocking on the door like that, the brigadier-general thought. He paused, and made a strange gesture, as though he had a shrewd idea as to who his visitor might be. He clenched his teeth, just as he did the first time he went over the top. He cast a downward glance, much as he did when the flare went up. He unfastened the door-latch and opened the door.

Outside there was nothing to see but the dense, sallow fog. He moved one step forward. If anyone had stood by the door at that moment, that observer would have just about made out a faint silhouette once the old soldier had taken his second step. Upon his third, he vanished. Perhaps there is some truth in that saying about old soldiers and all..