
Alexander: The Virtues of War

Steven Pressfield

ONE

A SOLDIER

I HAVE ALWAYS been a soldier. I have known no other life. The calling of arms, I have followed from boyhood. I have never sought another. I have known lovers, sired offspring, competed in games, and committed outrages when drunk. I have vanquished empires, yoked continents, been crowned as an immortal before gods and men. But always I have been a soldier.

From the time I was a boy, I fled my tutor to seek the company of the men in the barracks. The drill field and the stable, the smell of leather and sweat, these are congenial to me. The scrape of the whetstone on iron is to me what music is to poets. It has always been this way. I can remember no time when it was otherwise.

One such as myself must have learned much, a fellow might think, from campaign and experience. Yet I may state in candour: all that I know, I knew at thirteen and, truth to tell, at ten and younger. Nothing has come to me as a grown commander that I did not apprehend as a child.

As a boy I instinctively understood the ground, the march, the occasion, and the elements. I comprehended the crossing of rivers and the exploitation of terrain; how many units of what composition may traverse such and such a distance, how swiftly, bearing how much kit, arriving in what condition to fight. The drawing up of troops came as second nature to me: I simply looked; all showed itself clear. My father was the greatest soldier of his day, perhaps the greatest ever. Yet when I was ten I informed him that I would excel him. By twenty-three I had done so.

As a lad I was jealous of my father, fearing that he would achieve glory on such a scale as would leave none for me. I have never feared anything, save that mischance that would prevent me from fulfilling my destiny.

The army it has been my privilege to lead has been invincible across Europe and Asia. It has united the states of Greece and the islands of the Aegean; liberated from the Persian yoke the Greek cities of Ionia and Aeolia. It has brought into subjection Armenia, Cappadocia, both Lesser and Greater Phrygia, Paphlagonia, Caria, Lydia, Pisidia, Lycia, Pamphylia, both Hollow and Mesopotamian Syria, and Cilicia. The great strongholds of Phoenicia - Byblus, Sidon, Tyre, and the Philistine city of Gaza - have fallen before it. It has vanquished the central empire of Persia - Egypt and nearer Arabia, Mesopotamia, Babylonia, Media, Susiana, the rugged land of Persia herself - and the eastern provinces of Hyrcania, Areia, Parthia, Bactria, Tapuria,

Drangiana, Arachosia, and Sogdiana. It has crossed the Hindu Kush into India. It has never been beaten.

This force has been insuperable not for its numbers, for in every campaign it has entered the field outnumbered and outmanned; nor for the brilliance of its generalship or tactics, though these have not been inconsiderable; nor for the proficiency of its supply train and logistical corps, without which no force in the field can survive, let alone prevail. Rather, this army has succeeded because of qualities of warriorship in its individual soldiers, specifically that property expressed by the Greek word *dynamis*, 'the will to fight'. No general of this or any age has been so favoured by fortune as I, to lead such men, possessed of such warlike spirit, imbued with such resources of self-enterprise, committed so to their commanders and to their call.

Yet now what I have feared most has come to pass. The men themselves have grown weary of conquest. They draw up on the bank of this river of India, and they fail of passion to cross it. They have come too far, they believe. It is enough. They want to go home.

For the first time since I acceded to command, I have found it necessary to constitute a unit of the army as *Atactoi* - 'Malcontents' - and to segregate them from the central divisions of the corps. Nor are these fellows renegades or habitual delinquents, but crack troops, decorated veterans - many of whom trained under my father and his great general *Parmenio* - who have become so disaffected, from actions and words taken or omitted by me, that I can station them in the battle line only between units of unimpeachable loyalty, lest they prove false in the fatal hour. This day I have been compelled to execute five of their officers, homegrown Macedonians all, whose families are dear to me, for failure to promptly carry out an order. I hate this, not only for the barbarity of the measure but also for the deficiency of imagination it signalizes in me. Must I lead now by terror and compulsion? Is this the state to which my genius has been reduced?

When I was sixteen and rode for the first time at the head of my own corps of cavalry, I was so overcome that I could not stay myself from weeping. My adjutant grew alarmed and begged to know what distressed me. But the horsemen in their squadrons understood. I was moved by the sight of them in such brilliant order, by their scars and their silence, the weathered creasing of their faces. When the men saw my state, they returned my devotion, for they knew I would burst my heart for them. In strategy and tactics, even in valour, other commanders may be my equal. But in this, none surpasses me: the measure of my love for my comrades. I love even those who call themselves my enemies. Alone meanness and malice I despise. But the foe who stands with gallantry, him I draw to my breast, dear as a brother.

Those who do not understand war believe it contention between armies, friend against foe. No. Rather friend and foe duel as one against an unseen antagonist, whose name is Fear, and seek, even entwined in death, to mount to that promontory whose ensign is honour.

What drives the soldier is cardia, 'heart', and dynamis, 'the will to fight'. Nothing else matters in war. Not weapons or tactics, philosophy or patriotism, not fear of the gods themselves. Only this love of glory, which is the seminal imperative of mortal blood, as ineradicable within man as in a wolf or a lion, and without which we are nothing.

Look out there, Itanes. Somewhere beyond that river lies the Shore of Ocean: the Ends of the Earth. How far? Past the Ganges? Across the Range of Perpetual Snows? I can feel it. It calls me. There I must stand, where no prince has stood before me. There I must plant the lion standard of Macedon. Not till then will I grant rest to my heart or release to this army.

That is why I have called you here, my young friend. By day, I can keep up a front, knowing the men's eyes are on me. But at night, the crisis of the army overwhelms me.

I must unburden myself. I must reorder my thoughts. I must find an answer to the corps's alienation.

I need someone I can talk to, someone who stands outside the chain of command, who can listen without judgement and keep his mouth shut. You are my bride Roxanne's younger brother and, as such, beneath my protection only. No other may be your mentor, to no other may you carry this tale. These are my motives of confidentiality. As well, I recognize in you (for I have watched you closely since you came into my service in Afghanistan) that instinct of command and gift for war that no amount of schooling may impart. You are eighteen and will soon receive your commission. When we cross this river, you will lead men in battle for the first time. It is my role to instruct you, for, though prince you be in your own country, here you are only a Page, a cadet in the academy of war which is my tent.

Will you stay and hear my tale? I shall not compel you, for such confidences as I must disclose in attempting to reorder my priorities may place you in peril, not now while I live, but later, for they who succeed me will seek to employ your testimony for their own ends.

Will you serve your king and kinsman? Say aye and you shall come to me each evening at this hour, or at such interval as may suit my convenience. You need not speak, only listen, though I may employ you as the occasion demands upon errands of trust or discretion. Say nay and I release you now, with no hard feelings.

You are honoured to serve, you say?

Well, my young friend.

Sit then. Let us begin . . .