

Soldier Semiotics – a deconstruction of gay sm fantasies and the continuing gay icon status of the soldier gladiator hero and his submissive counterpart in the ranks, the perfect soldier of the line who endures with his squaddie mates the privations and suffering of training and fighting together in the comrade fellowship of military service.

Soldiering is a profession that is a dangerous and dirty job. How does it come to be the ancestor of all gay macho submission - domination imagery?

by squaddieJH@aol.com © 2002

England was conquered in 1066AD by the army of the Norman King, William of France. He rewarded the heroic deeds of his warrior friends with rights as Lords over the Anglo Saxon peasant serfs who worked the land as feudal slaves in peacetime and foot soldiers at war.

Feudalism survived for the following centuries despite revolts by the Lords (1215) and peasants (1385). External aggression by the Spanish was overcome in 1588. A Civil War (Cromwell) and attempted coup d'état (Guy Fawkes) strengthened parliamentary democracy but failed to depose the monarchy.

Mechanised factories and foreign trade revolutionised the social system: the Industrial Revolution widened democratic rights.

War was still necessary to defend Empire trade and territory but the factory workers had freed themselves of the feudal obligation to military service, as they were no longer feudal slaves.

Soldiers and sailors were recruited by "dragooning": recruiting squads visited a town and picked men off the street or out of the pubs. This method and the quality and quantity of these recruits were unsatisfactory.

Volunteers were recruited by making the image of war and duty appear attractive enough for men to leave their homes to fight for King and Country. Naval and army service was presented as romantic and worthwhile by songs, military parades and tableaux.

Photography, realistic journalism and word of mouth reports of the grim details of fighting undermined the concept of war conducted by an officer class out of touch with the physical realities of soldiering at the Front.

Throughout World War 1, "The Great War" and World War 2, "The Peoples' War" morale was maintained by controlling publicity. The image of soldiers, sailors and airmen as heroic fighters for the Nation was revived for the Falklands Conflict and Gulf War.

For the European Balkan "Peacekeeping" assignments a new image has emerged with the British playing a part as highly organised, technically trained

professional soldiers. This image has been developed for adventures in the current "War against Terrorism".

This is the historical background; to maintain the façade the public have for centuries been presented with attractive images of war and armies for recruitment and publicity purposes. Taking pleasure from military activities obscures the grizzly realities. After the event, history is presented differently from the actuality as experienced in the muddy trenches.

Movies about wars are still being made as military adventures make popular entertainment. Each time that a historical subject is revisited there is a conflict between presenting the topic more accurately but through greater hindsight. "Gallipoli" showed the Anzac assault on the Dardanelles much more for what it was than did newspaper accounts at the time. But is "The Longest Day" with all its contemporaneous accuracy and props better than "Saving Private Ryan"? Did "The Great Escape" present a more realistic picture of prisoner of war life than "Colditz"? Or compare the two films of "Beau Geste" with the Foreign Legion revisited in the 1990's in "Légionnaire" with Van Damme.

Throughout military history the themes of subjugation to discipline and order in the defence of the Realm can be sublimated as sadomasochistic fantasy. Anne Rice set her "Beauty" fantasies in the feudal Middle Ages as the archetypal setting for whole-life bondage and submission in a world of Lord and serf and barbaric marauders.

TE Lawrence lived a heroic life as a romantic freelancer and rode into Jerusalem victorious for the British officer class. He transferred to the air force as an ordinary airman to experience life as one submissive tooth of a cogwheel in the machine of a technical army. Mundane day-to-day service life was enlivened by a masochistic relationship with a man that we would now recognise as a sadomasochistic master specialising in corporal punishment.

The Prisoner of War escapers and Fighter Ace pilots of both sides during World War 2, and heroes like Andy McNab of the SAS in the Gulf War produced modern images of heroic individual daring-do.

The individual skilled soldier, highly trained, skilled and motivated becomes the modern hero, successor to the crusader and the gladiator. His skills and courage make a difference to his chances of success and survival in the age of wars of apparently indiscriminate mechanised mass destruction such as that first seen on the fields of Flanders in World War 1.

This hero figure is the basis of the unachievable fantasy that is at the heart of the male sadomasochistic fantasy. Hero worship is a turn-on for many but sustaining a heroic existence is impossible for would-be heroes.

The hero is worshiped both as a super man and through fetishist worship of his clothing and equipment: his uniform and boots. His rifle becomes a size and power extension of his phallus.

The counterpart to the hero is the drone and the illusion of total submission is an essential half of the sadomasochistic fantasy. In the military context drones are not alone: masochistic mates endure privations and suffering together in the comrade fellowship of the "Band of Brothers". For many this is an attractive part of the homoerotic fantasy of submission to military discipline. However to obey orders without thinking is to deny all the characteristics that separate humanity from animals: the "Nuremburg Defence" is not acceptable in civilisation.

Through the extreme social mechanisms of World War 2, human society rejected the fascist domination ethic; however abstraction of the homoerotic detail from the uniforms of the occupying German SS provided the inspiration for Tom of Finland and the basis for the initial imagery of leather SM; it has developed to encompass motorbikers, prison guards and cons, firemen, manual construction work gang foreman and labourers, sportsmen and trainers plus many others.

The hero image has broadened to encompass the rebel hero which has developed to the skinhead, both as rebel gang leader Boss and submissive gang member clones or individual skinhead rebels against society.

Mohawk hair cropping originated with the para commandos of the 1944 Normandy Beach landings, who adopted the distinctive hair crops of the native American Mohawk warrior tribe. Skinhead hair cropping originates in the enforced head shaving of prison convicts and concentration camp workers for identification and health reasons but which came to be a mark of oppression.

Gay sadomasochism now has a distinct existence with its own vocabulary and includes images not limited to its military, convict and leather origins.

Neither hero nor drone fantasy figure is possible to realise on a sustained basis. Drones are subhuman with suppressed emotions and to live that life in reality stifles the humanity of those who try to live it.

There is the paradox that blind obedience as a perfect soldier does not make a hero. Drones trained to only obey orders do not win gladiatorial contests; heroes are inspired but are always fundamentally flawed by internal conflicts that they struggle to resolve. These conflicts are inherent in the hero role.

The heroic image is frequently repeated as an object of male achievement and it seems entirely natural to claim a part of this fantasy as a gay icon even though the dream is impossible: "If you don't have a dream, how you gonna have a dream come true?"

Nowhere is this more evident than in the sublimation of international conflict to combat on the sports fields: sportsmen are human flesh, bones and – most important of all – emotions.

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squaddieJH@aol.com
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