The Amazing, True Story of
The Boston School Boy Cadets

by
David Kruh

One of the first things Ray Barron did after graduating from Boston Latin High School in 1943 was to sign up for military service. Shipped to Camp Swift, Texas, he soon found himself standing at attention with several hundred other raw recruits while a grizzled drill sergeant eyed them over.

"Any of you boys ever have any military training?" the drill sergeant barked. Ray couldn't believe it when only one hand shot up - his own. The sergeant eyed Barron warily.

"Where are you from, son?"

"Boston, sir."

"And where in Boston did they teach you military training?"

"Boston Latin."

"Is that a private school?"

"No, sir, it's a public school."

"I don't believe that. Nobody teaches military drill in public schools these days."

"But its true, sir, I had four years of training in the manual of arms, marching, and drilling with weapons."

At that point, Ray recalls today, the sergeant insisted on proof of his recruit's military prowess. "So I spent part of my first day in the army drilling my company as my stunned drill sergeant looked on."

What the drill sergeant found so hard to believe in 1943 is even harder to comprehend today - that from the time of the Civil War to the Vietnam era, military training was a required course for every male student in Boston's public schools. Commonly known as the Boston School Boy Cadets, it was, without question, one of the most unusual aspects of public education in this city.

Beginning in his eighth grade, every boy was assigned the rank of private and placed into one of several regiments created from the school rolls. Twice a week, these regiments would

assemble to learn the manual of arms - an all-to-familiar sequence of movements (present arms, order arms, port arms, right shoulder arms, and present arms) learned by everyone in the service. Under the instruction of a reserve army, navy, marine, or air force officer, boys were also taught marching in formation, company maneuvers, posture, and inspection.

If the student excelled in their military studies and performed their duties well, they were given points towards promotion. School Boy Cadets who showed leadership skills were given command of a regiment. These skills were put to the test once a year, when regiments competed for the honor of representing their school at an annual city-wide competition of drum and bugle corps, marching bands, drill teams, and regiments.

Boston Latin Headmaster Michael Contompasis, who was also a student at the school in the late 1950s, recalls that "whomever was the company commander of the school's winning regiment was made brigadier for the entire school. And that was a pretty big deal, especially when it came time for the parade."

The Boston School Boy Cadets parade was an annual event that took the boys through the heart of the city, past thousands of cheering and flag waving citizens, as well as the mayor and other city officials, who would review the troops and hand out awards to the best regiments. The parade, an annual event, became the most visible example of how military drill had become not only an important part of the school year, but an integral part of the life of the city. For many years it rivaled Opening Day, the Fourth of July, and the Marathon for the city's attention.

Boston Latin alumnus Mel Goldberg, who graduated in 1933, remembers the Cadets Parade fondly. "We would hang around town after the parade. Instead of going back to school we'd load our rifles into the truck and they'd take them back to school. Then we'd walk around town, and we had those uniforms with the purple patch and the white L, and we were kings of Boston for one stinkin' day."

For Jackie Rush, another former cadet, the parade also offered a sobering reminder for what military drill was preparing them. Jackie recalled recently that "in the 1947 School Boy Parade, I am directly in back of the veterans who had come out of the Second World War. Not only veterans but mothers and fathers and girls and all those who saw their brothers and sons and husbands come home from a war. So you had to remember it was just high school stuff."

The fact that, ultimately, it was just "high school stuff" was clear to anyone who was there when the parade ended in Boston's Copley Square. Joe LaPicollo, a 1959 graduate of Boston Trade, remembers that "all along the parade route there would be girls who knew you from your parish or your neighborhood. One of the things they used to do is collect the patches from different schools. At the end of the parade all the girls would rush the cadets and tear the patches off their arms. But when they grabbed the patches, sometimes the whole sleeve would come off! So, instead of sewing the patches, we had to bring our uniforms home and have our mothers attach snaps to our uniforms and the patches. So when a girl went to pull it off the sleeve wouldn't rip."

Military drill was supposed to instill a certain sense of duty and discipline, yet it sometimes proved to be no match for the streak of insubordination found in most boys. "I can remember one time with a bunch of kids I hooked school and went to the old Leow's Orpheum where they had a lot of vaudeville," an unnamed truant recalls. "The master of ceremonies used to stand on stage and say 'Okay, English High over on this side of the room and Dorchester High on the other.' One day in comes Colonel Driscoll, the instructor for English High. He had the lights put on and marched everybody from English out of the Orpheum, down the street, all the way back to the high school."

Inter-school rivalries, showing off to the neighborhood girls, playing hooky, and teenage camaraderie all sound like things associated with every high school in any town from any era. These, however, were associated with a unique program of high school military drill which began in Boston during the Civil War.

How the School Boy Cadets Began

The secession of several southern slave-holding states in 1861 triggered the beginning of what would become, up to that time, America's bloodiest war. The patriotic and militaristic fever that swept the Union had a unique impact on education in New England. As young men signed up for military service, the private Chauncy Hall School in Boston and a few public schools in neighboring Brookline began organizing companies of school boys for martial drill and parade.

In 1863 the Massachusetts State Board of Education, at the urging of the state legislature, studied the idea of making military drill a regular part of the public school curriculum for boys over the age of twelve. Though the board's report was favorable towards drill, efforts to pass the bill through the legislature were thwarted by William Lloyd Garrison, James Allen, and Dio Lewis, and other activists.

Many of Boston's citizens, unmoved by pacifist arguments against military drill and unwilling to wait for the state legislature to act, submitted a petition in November of 1863 which asked for "a speedy introduction...of military drill and discipline into the public schools" They further wrote that "as parents the hygienic effect of a thorough military training would not only be the physical exercises so long talked of for our public schools, but it would inoculate a more manly spirit into the boys, extend their memory, make them more graceful, invigorating and gentlemanly..."

A school sub-committee on military drill recommended the program for the Latin, English High, Eliot, and Dwight Schools. Two weeks later the school committee authorized the hiring of Boston's first Teacher of Military Drill, Captain Hobart Moore, a 31 year old Sudbury native who was the Captain of a battalion in the Massachusetts Volunteer Militia, and an instructor of military tactics for the Union army. For the next thirty-one years, until his death (at the rank of General) in 1894, he would not only be an instructor of military training in the Boston public schools, but the program's champion and defender.

In November of 1889, during a speech to a Conference on Physical Training, Moore said that military drill "helps training boys to habits of obedience, obedience which is prompt, which is unquestioned, and which boys feel to be manly. It develops a more manly spirit in the boy, invigorates his intellect...makes him more graceful and gentlemanly in his bearing, and fits him for the primary duties of life, - those of a good citizen."

Though Moore saw the program as a method of assuring the physical fitness of Boston's young men, the military aspect of the Cadets took on greater significance following American victories in the Spanish-American War and World War I. As the country grew into a world power overseas, students in Boston saw their Cadet activities as an extension of that power. Henry Albert McCurdy, a School Boy Colonel, wrote this in the 1919 Boston Latin yearbook: "Think of the deeds of daring accomplished...the heroic sons of Latin School who died that

democracy might live...These magnificent sons of the Latin School, at their country's call to arms, entered the ranks of the nation's defenders. There as here, they acquitted themselves nobly."

Following the attack on Pearl Harbor and America's entry into the Second World War, high schools around the city increased funding for military drill. By now, the School Boy Cadet program was inexorably linked with real soldiers fighting real battles overseas. In the 1942 English High yearbook, one student, moved by the spirit of the times, wrote: "From his Freshman to his Senior year, each cadet is given an opportunity to advance through the ranks from buck private to colonel. This training, the importance of which is today revealed in unmistakable clarity, serves well the city, state, and nation, by preparing the boys of America for the defense of our country."

This connection of School Boy Cadets to real soldiering was not limited to the pages of high school yearbooks. Thousands of former School Boy cadets became real privates in the armed forces during the war. Almost all found that being a Boston School Boy Cadet gave them a tremendous advantage in the service, especially in the first few months of training. City Councilor Albert "Dapper" O'Neil graduated from Roxbury Memorial High School in 1937 and was a sergeant in the School Boy Cadets. Four weeks after the attack on Pearl Harbor he was in uniform, and soon after that made platoon leader, a fact he attributes to his high school military training. He says that "it taught me to respect superior officers, the rules, regulations and the orders."

Robert Fisher graduated from English High in 1940, and after serving in the Air Force, (where he rose to the rank of Captain), became that school's military instructor. "Anyone who graduated from school in the thirties or forties went right into the service," says Fisher. "I was appointed an Air Force military drill instructor within three days! Boston boys seemed to be dominant among the new recruits."

Despite the tremendous support School Boy Cadets enjoyed during the war, following the signing of the armistice in August, 1945, the program found itself at odds with the world that the war had created. A growing number of people began to question whether 13 year-old boys should be spending time in school learning how to become good soldiers.

The end of the School Boy Cadets

Although, from its inception, the Boston School Boy cadets program enjoyed wide public support, two major efforts to cut the program were launched in 1879 and 1926. Each was during a post-war period marked by a rise in the pacifist movement. Both were defeated in the face of strong support from parents, teachers, and administrators.

During the 1950s, however, the first signs of dissent from within the school system began to appear as educators, administrators, and parents began questioning some of the fundamental beliefs about military drill's benefits to the average student. It was argued by some that gym classes provided the necessary physical education for the students, and that, thanks to modern technology, military drill was becoming obsolete. Captain Fisher recalls that "a lot of them figured 'we have the atomic bomb, why do we need soldiers?' They felt secure and just didn't see the need for military drill or military science."

To answer those critics, Fisher added courses such as First Aid, Geopolitics, and Atomic Warfare Defense. These "improvements" did not stop several schools from unilaterally cutting the number of hours each boy had to spend in military drill by half. This was followed, in 1958, by a city-wide order reducing to one the number of periods that tenth graders would spend drilling. Two years later the school committee eliminated drill in the tenth grade, and a year later it was dropped for all grades at Trade, Dorchester, and East Boston High Schools.

Though the participants did not know it at the time, the last School Boy Cadets Parade was held on May 24, 1960. It had originally been canceled after the school committee, facing a drop in appropriations for the entire system and a lack of interest from the cadets, cut the parade's funding. An abbreviated parade route was authorized only after Ray Barron, the young recruit who had survived not only that first day of boot camp, but three years of combat in World War II, donated the money required for traffic control. Despite his own enthusiasm for the event, turnout was light - so light that the Boston Globe's headline the next day read "Crowd Barely Outnumbers Cadets at Parade."

Further evidence of the public's waning enthusiasm for military training came after the parade. Instead of thanks from his fellow citizens for maintaining a tradition, Barron says he was

instead deluged with angry letters, many of them from teachers, "some whom called me a fascist for supporting military drill in the schools!"

In 1965, as news of the Vietnam War reached the front pages on a daily basis, headmasters at both Latin and English High, the original two schools that began teaching military drill during the Civil War, recommended its elimination from the curriculum. The school committee vote was unanimous. Though the drill team continued as an extra-curricular activity until 1971, Captain Fisher, who watched its demise with resignation, says that "it became a four letter word after Kent State. You could see the resentment towards the regimentation in both the students and the teachers. It's my feeling that even the kids who did well felt that it was just a waste of time." The School Boy Cadets passed away that year without any fanfare.

How ironic that in a city where guns and violence threaten the safety of children in schools, a program that trained youngsters how to handle weapons of war should have existed. Yet it not only existed, but flourished, and was for many years an integral part of the life of the city.