



*THE  
NORTHERN  
GARRISONS*

Eric Linklater

THE ARMY AT WAR

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WITH THREE MAPS IN LINE

## THE NORTHERN GARRISONS

### I. *The Better Road*

A DOZEN YEARS AGO, when most of the world was at peace, and as conscious of its precarious good fortune as a man on a raft, an American woman said to me with considerable energy: "There can be only one excuse for another war. None of the old reasons—dynastic, religious, economic, the desire for power—is worth a war to people who remember the misery and frustration of the last one. None of the old boundaries, between this country and that, is worth fighting for. But there's a new frontier, a slowly forming frontier, that would be worth defending, even against the extravagance of tanks and poison-gas and bombers. It's a frontier of the mind."

"And where do you draw it?"

"Between the Sensibles and the Stupids. We've got to avoid fanaticism, and good sense is the only great cause about which its followers can't grow fanatical: because that would destroy the cause. And all the nicest virtues, like honesty and charity, are cultivated by the Sensibles, because they know that any tolerable society must be built on qualities of that sort."

"But the Stupids?" I asked.

"You don't want me to define them? It would take too long. But in a way they're old-fashioned people."

They cling to the most elderly vices, like cruelty and intolerance, greed and injustice."

"While the Sensibles," I enquired, "may be easily recognised by their opposite virtues?"

"Well, you mustn't expect too much," she said.

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I WAS DRIVING into Reykjavik over a crudely built and tormented road. The surrounding plain was covered with enormous cinders, and mountains rose to crests as ragged as a cock's comb. I said to the R.A.S.C. driver, "What do you think of Iceland?"

"Not much," he answered.

"How long have you been here?"

"About ten months."

"But you haven't got used to it yet?"

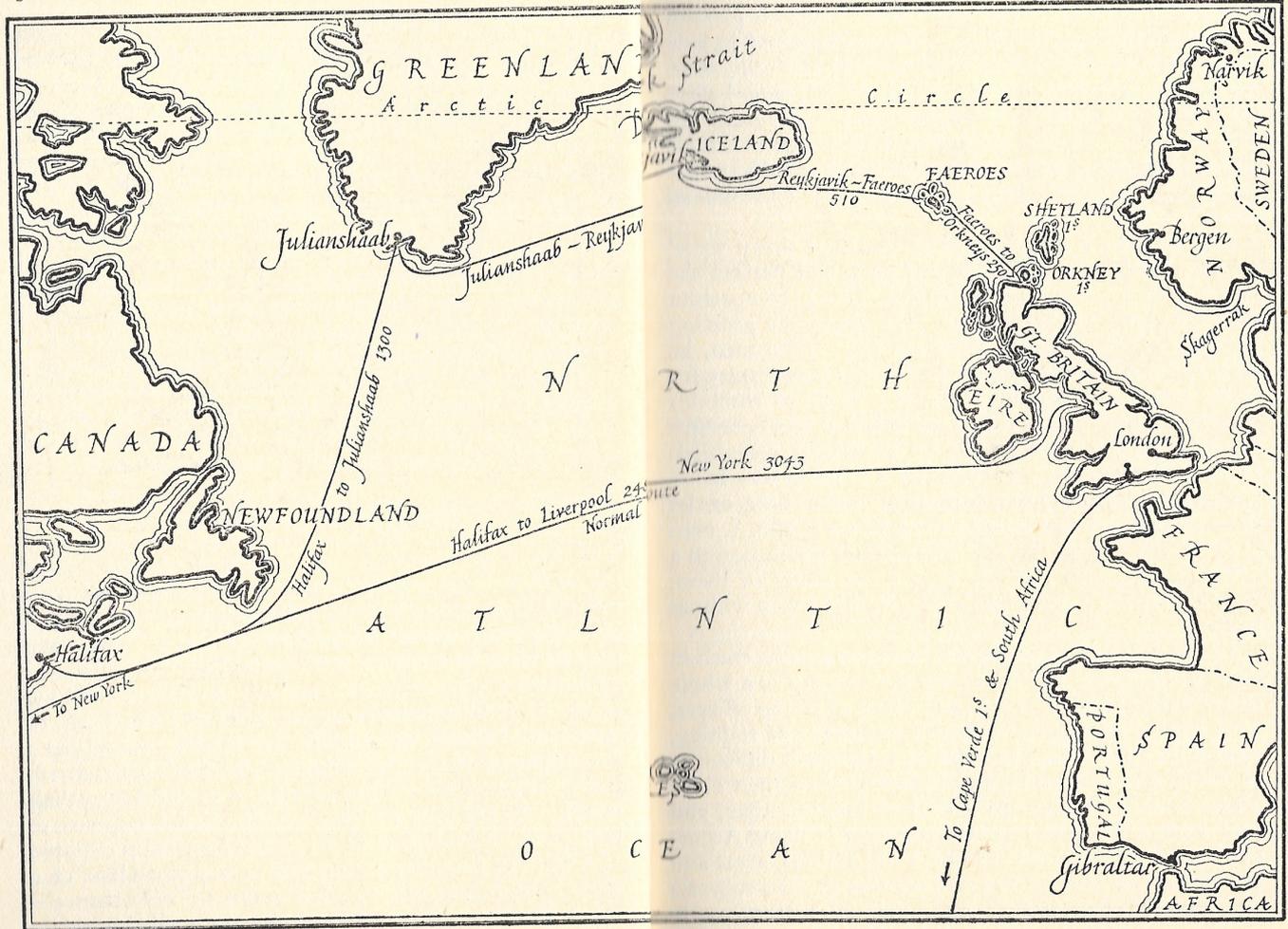
"Oh, I've got used to it all right. There's no good setting yourself against a place, if you've got to live in it. But it's not what I like."

I had heard the same sort of thing from soldiers in Orkney and Shetland. I was to hear it again in the Faeroes. There, scattered widely over the sea, were men who had willingly undertaken a long and tedious duty, a duty whose tedium could only be relieved by danger, because they had realised the issue of the war, and because they knew, by intuition if not by active reason, that Hitler was wrong—biologically wrong—and Britain, with all its faults, was on the better road. They had made their choice, and they were sticking to it with intelligence, determination, and a good-humoured endurance which were to my mind the very stuff of such a victory as my American friend had desired. The victory of the Sensibles over the Stupids.

These soldiers, doing garrison-duty in the North Atlantic islands, possess qualities upon which our future civilisation—a civilisation more handsome to the eye, more flattering to the mind, more soothing to the conscience—may very solidly be raised. Few of them enjoy a soldier's life. They put up with it, and make the best of it, because they know the reason of their service: because they have a sense of responsibility. Their temper is individual, easy going, but with merely a perfunctory grumbling they accept an exigent discipline, and respond to it. Many of them are serving in small detachments, remote from their fellows and far away from easy amusement, and in these circumstances they are discovering—or many of them are discovering—unsuspected resources in themselves. They have turned their hands to all manner of unfamiliar jobs, they have learnt to rely on their own strength and ingenuity. And their officers are showing imagination, initiative, and leadership.

#### *Leadership and Imagination*

The Army has always known that leadership is one of the supremely important human qualities, and less regimented, more consciously intellectual critics have been equally aware of the value of imagination. You have only to visit, let us say, a few coastal batteries in Iceland or Shetland to perceive how right is the Army, and how right the intellectual observer. A disciplined body of men cannot always show individual intelligence—even a committee cannot, and certainly a crowd will never do so, because there is something paralysing in numbers—their intelligence can only be shown in intelligent response to intelligent leadership. But the sort of leadership required of a Battery Commander on the untenanted slope of a snow-bound Icelandic fjord is more difficult than the quick decision and personal courage of a subaltern who



sees a sudden opening in the field, and leads his platoon to a successful attack. The leadership required in garrison-duty requires considerable imagination. The nearest enemies are boredom and inertia, and before they can be attacked, the officer must understand the nature of his men, the hunger of their minds and their digestive capacity, and then contrive ways to satisfy their needs. Many officers are doing so with conspicuous success.

One day, to a Regular officer of about thirty years' service, I said something of this sort, and praised the Army of to-day—perhaps by way of bait—in comparison with the Army of the last war. He admitted a growing intelligence, but accused it of softness. The men, he said, had not been trained to the hardness necessary for really bitter campaigning. To the pitch of stubborn endurance, both physical and mental, that was necessary for either prolonged attack or successful rearguard-action. The modern soldier, he declared, was being pampered. Battle-dress had encouraged him to be slovenly, and he had learnt to expect an E.N.S.A. concert, or free cinema show, as the normal conclusion to a day's work. And the officers, or too many of them, were allowed to believe that battles could be won without losses.

In the first winter of the war there was some truth in these charges, but in that winter the country as a whole had not attuned itself to war, and a host of young officers, with negligible experience and a minimum of training, were unhappily trying to cope with the twin difficulties of learning their own jobs and keeping their men occupied. Soldiers need a great deal of looking after, and junior officers had to learn the necessity of being Argus-eyed about such matters as boots and rations, arms and equipment, socks and shirts and sore throats and requests for compassionate leave. Army administration, more-

over, is a tangled thicket to the newcomer, and many a Company Commander, who would gladly have been hardening his men for battle, had to spend dreary hours with Allowance Regulations and the Paymaster's correspondence in order to unravel the financial difficulties of his Officers and Other Ranks.

An officer whom I knew well once took from his pocket-book the copy of a letter which read as follows :—

SUBJECT : Pay and Allowances—Officers.  
The Command Paymaster,  
————— Command.

Reference : C.P. Pl.C./Allowances/Trav./101-23,  
dated 3.5.40.

Lieut. J. K. W.....  
2/Lieut. T. R. P.....

See my A.F. 01848, Serial No. 31, dated 22.4.40. Claims on behalf of these officers have already been amended in response to your C.P. Pl.C./Allowances/Trav./98-43, dated 18.4.40. The amended claims were as follows :—

Lieut. J. K. W.....	1 night's Det. Allowance Rate I (Allowance Regs. p. 354) and R.A.H.R. (with M.S.E.) for period 29.2.40—1.3.40 incl.
2/Lieut. T. R. P.....	1 night's Det. Allowance Rate I and R.A.H.R. (with M.S.E.) for period 29.2.40—4.3.40 incl.

Copies of A.Fs. 01771 in respect of these officers, as previously corrected, are herewith enclosed.

The letter was dated May 10th.

“The composition of that thing,” he said, “with the necessary checking and disentangling, occupied half the morning of the day on which Jerry punched his first hole in the French line. It's a magnificent letter, as such things go, and I'm rather proud of it. You may say that it's quite incomprehensible, but I assure you that it fitted the case like a glove. It was necessary to write it,

and I was the only person capable of writing it. It was a good job of work—and can you tell me how it helped to hold up the Boche advance?”

But nowadays familiarity has lessened the difficulties of administration, and soldier-clerks have been trained to deal with most of them. Nowadays an officer has more time to spend on war training, and in the Northern Garrisons the hardening process is very zealously pursued.

There is a Highland battalion in Orkney whose Commanding Officer took advantage of the very severe winter to inaugurate night marching. Over the island roads, swept by wind and bitter with sleet, his companies navigated the long darkness. One night, on the northern shore of Scapa Flow, the leading sections had to link arms to brace themselves against the winter gale. But they did eighteen miles, and no one fell out. And when the weather improved their training took them to sea, in small boats and drifters, and they began to practise the business of landing on unknown shores, of assaulting rocky beaches. It is a pretty sight to see them leaping, heavy-burdened, into the cold green sea, and charging ashore. They do it with a Highland élan—though many of the Highlanders, to tell the truth, are Cockneys—and they seem to enjoy it. Softness has been eliminated from that battalion.

In Shetland there are long hill-slopes, great empty valleys that pasture black-faced sheep, but were good for nothing else till they became a training area. Now they are busy every day with soldiers in battle-order and the swiftness of mimic war. There is room and to spare for far-flung exercises, that interfere with nothing but the nesting birds—black-headed gulls, peewits and terns, most bitterly object—and the soldiers return from a twenty-mile march, with a battle thrown in, looking strong and cheerful. They complain, however, that

training becomes a bore when there is no enemy to freshen the appetite for it: after so many imitation battles, they feel a restless desire to try their strength on reality. The hardening process has made them fit for action, and they know it.

In the Faeroes there are Gunners who keep their quarters as smart and clean as a Housing Exhibition—no slackness there—and the Lovat Scouts patrol the hills and cross high cloudy moors with a stalker's speed, or sail from island to island in seas that could make a member of the Cruising Club look serious. Softness is not apparent there.

In Iceland, on lava fields where nothing lives—mile after mile of withered moss and volcanic boulders—you may see training battles that very closely imitate reality. Because of the great extent and desolation of the country, the Gunners can fire live shells, the Infantry can advance under a real barrage, and use their own weapons with singular freedom. The men have been toughened by a sub-arctic winter, and now, with uncommon thoroughness, they are being taught the circumstances and clamour of a battle-field. The Iceland Force is hard-working, muscled hard, and well acquainted with climatic hardship.

The hardening process is general. Toughness has been acquired but not at the expense of qualities not less valuable. The men have kept their balance, their tolerance, and good humour. They grumble, of course. They are pretty well browned-off, they will tell you. But their good nature miraculously survives the toughening to which they have been subjected, and their dislike of far-away and lonely service.

They are the proper people to be fighting the war of the Sensibles against the Stupids; and they are fit to do it. They themselves, their life and future, make our cause sufficient.

## II. *The Strategy of The Stepping-Stones*

IT IS A good many years since the Americans with their genius for making language picturesque, christened the Atlantic the Herring Pond. This affectionate diminutive was prophetic. From the day of that imaginative baptism the Atlantic has grown narrower and narrower, till on the outbreak of the second German war it became our principal Communication Trench. Great Britain was the forward zone of the war of the Sensibles against the Stupids, and the United States were the great Reserve area from which, it soon grew obvious, we should be supplied, in ever-increasing quantity, with munitions and food and fuel and arms.

But the Communication Trench had to be guarded. It was open to attack by U-boats and surface raiders. It became more vulnerable after the German conquest of Norway and France. The long-range bomber was added to its enemies and the Battle of the Atlantic was fought with gathering intensity. From the beginning of the war it was a ruthless battle, and before long it became apparent that it would be a decisive battle. Loss of the battle would mean starvation for Britain. Victory would ensure our line of communication and the power, with America's good will, to draw on the illimitable strength of the United States.

Fortunately for us there existed, on the one side of the trench, the chain of islands which have been transformed into the armed camps of our Northern Garrisons. From these bases the Navy and the Royal Air Force have defended the Atlantic trench; and the Army has

defended the bases. We have suffered grievous losses in the battle, but the trench has remained open. Our Merchant Navy, magnificent in its workaday dress and undrilled heroism, goes to and fro and the strength of the Americas comes pouring in. The islands have served a strategic purpose of the highest importance.

They may also remind us of a platitude which has never had the serious attention it deserves: that history has a tendency to repeat itself. Nearly a thousand years ago the islands became for a very little while the stepping-stones between the Old World and the New. The best men in Norway, refusing to accept a despotic king, went west over-sea to colonise Iceland and Orkney. Some time later the Icelandic Norsemen discovered and colonised a small part of Greenland. And from Greenland they made voyages to North America.

They were, however, too few in numbers to occupy and develop their new discovery. North America was to remain, for several hundred years, unknown to the older world, though it seems likely that stories of its wealth and beauty—the Norsemen called it Wineland—persisted in Iceland, and were told, perhaps, to Christopher Columbus when he sailed there in 1477. But Columbus, with his own notion of geography, rejected the northern route and went to look for India in the Caribbean.

It is only in our time that the Viking Road has been re-discovered, and also we have perceived that the Norsemen's stepping-stones are broad enough for a two-way traffic. America first made Greenland safe against German invasion, and now America goes forward to meet and then relieve our troops in Iceland. The stepping-stones may become a highway for the two nations that still hold, against all assault, their perilous and high belief in freedom and democracy.

This was the road by which America was first discovered. If it grows busy, with increasing traffic, it may be one of the roads from which we shall discover an even greater territory: our common interest in common sense, in freedom and justice and man's desire for the day when he, with all his neighbours, shall live in peace.

#### *The Viking Road*

If you go to the farthest land in Scotland, and look north again, you will see the nearest of the islands that reach, like sentry-groups, across the cold front of the Atlantic battlefield. Orkney, Shetland, the Faeroes, and Iceland: that is the sequence, and though all the islands have their own characteristics, they make common property of stormy weather.

Orkney is the first of the archipelagoes. Over the Pentland Firth—it should be the Pictland Firth—lies the red-cliffed island of Hoy, like a lion at ease, and Hoy is one of the long walls of Scapa Flow, which, in this war as the last, is the chief anchorage of the Home Fleet. The other walls are the Mainland of Orkney and South Ronaldsay; and the gaps between them are partly filled by the lesser islands of Graemsay, Burray, Flotta, and some yet smaller. The chief purpose of the Orkney garrison is to man the walls that enclose the lake which accommodates the Fleet.

The people of Orkney are, for the most part, farmers who own their land and cultivate it with prudence, sufficient energy, and modern methods. They are of Norse descent, with an increasing strain of Scottish blood. Their cathedral of St. Magnus was founded in 1137, but that is a youthful building in comparison with the graves and villages that bewilder speculation with their prehistoric masonry. The islands, low lying for the most part, have for long been attractive to settlers, and the

Royal Air Force, the most recent colonists, have found them as useful a base as did the Vikings.

The climate is officially stated to be mild, but the troops there do not share this opinion. When their period of service in the islands has expired, however, many of them leave with a reluctance which, on their first arrival, they did not anticipate.

The Shetlands, which lie, centre from centre, about a hundred miles to the north-east of Orkney, are surprisingly different both in appearance and character. Their scenery has a wilder beauty, their land is poorer. The people, also of Norse descent, are sailors and fishermen rather than farmers. More than three thousand Shetlanders are, in this war, serving afloat either in the Royal Navy or the Merchant Navy. From north to south the islands stretch for seventy miles, but from east to west the sea often pinches them to the narrowness of a hill or two, or a couple of fields.

From Lerwick, the capital, to Bergen in Norway is only a hundred and eighty miles, and one of the functions of the garrison is obvious: to hold the islands against invasion. The other purpose is to protect the aerodromes from which the Royal Air Force patrols the Norwegian Coast and guards the Atlantic approaches.

Torshavn, the capital of the Faeroes, lies more than two hundred miles north-west of Lerwick. The Faeroes, from the sea, have a grim, a gloomy appearance. They are twenty or so in number, and rising abruptly from the ocean, contrive for much of the year to conceal their heights in cloud. They are Danish islands, but many of the people have strong nationalist tendencies. They speak their own language, and the men often wear their national costume: a dark red two-pointed cap, a closely-knitted jacket and waistcoat—navy-blue or brown—with silver buttons for Sunday, knee-breeches, and buckled shoes. They are fearless and skilful sailors, and

such industrious farmers that the lower slopes of their precipitous hills are belted with pasture or tillage, though every rood must first be cleared of boulders. Their soil is so thin that they must cut two turves to make a cover for every seed potato they plant, and when it has grown they replace the turves for pasture. Yet from this toil-some farming they have been able of late to export potatoes to Iceland.

These people, who have so many of the antique virtues—and it would be unfair to deny them one or two of the antique frailties—are friendly with our troops, and have shown them much hospitality. To compensate them for service in so far and stormy a region, our soldiers have sometimes shared the uncommon sport of whale-hunting: in the summer months a shoal of bottle-nosed whales, some ten or twelve feet long, will occasionally come into a fjord, and whenever this happens the whole of the adjacent male population will put to sea in small boats, and drive and harry the whales ashore, where they are slaughtered in a fine confusion of blood and blubber and joyous excitement, after which, it is likely, there will be a dancing of the Faeroese reel to the accompaniment of interminable Faeroese ballads. The kidneys of a whale are said to be a great delicacy.

#### *Reykjavik—Town of Contrasts*

Iceland is bigger by a fifth than Ireland, and its northern extremities almost touch the Arctic Circle. Reykjavik, the capital, is a town of some forty thousand inhabitants, and anyone who has the time and the inclination may dance there every night of the week to an orchestra that is no worse than many other dance orchestras. It is an interesting town, and illustrates on all sides the recent material progress of the country, and the ambitious temper of its people. A generation ago the houses were

nearly all of wood—farm buildings of turf—but concrete has taken the place of timber, and now there are rows of new houses all built according to modern notions of simplicity and functionalism, a rank of windowed cubes with a shelf on each to catch the sun. And in the growing untidy streets, a mixture still of concrete, wood, and corrugated iron, there are little hat-shops, very daintily dressed, with an elegant sample or two of the latest fashions from New York; there are book-shops, half-a-dozen of them, that put to shame the illiteracy of many an English town of greater size; and there are flower shops where, through the driving snow of a spring blizzard, you may discern a sheaf of roses, a pot of hydrangeas, that have been grown in greenhouses warmed by the hot springs of this icy and volcanic island.

An interesting town, with a brand-new university of its own, a National Theatre—not wholly finished yet—and a statue to Leif Ericsson, the Iclander who discovered America. You will be told, of course, that Reykjavik is not Iceland; and indeed it differs greatly from the hinterland, where life has a patriarchal simplicity, a stark and noble loneliness, and in whose far-off valleys there has lived, as a vital thing, the greatest literature of the north; the common language is hardly altered from the years when the story of *Burnt Njal* was written, the sagas of *Grettir the Outlaw*, of *Egil Skallagrimsson*, poet and Viking. Their regard for this native literature, and their heroic past, has made the Icelanders a proud people; and, being proud, they did not welcome our intrusion.

But Iceland, because of its position, had to be occupied. It commands the North Atlantic, and if Germany had seized it first, the Battle of the Atlantic by now would have been a German victory.