

CAPTAIN BOB'S ACADEMY *(Originally published March 1975)*

Robert Macauley Perrin retired from the Army as a Captain shortly after World War I and, in the early Twenties, established his own private military school for boys in New Orleans. It is just as well he isn't alive today to view and comment on what goes on in his treasured field of early education. Even forty-five years ago, he could not believe that there might be any significant merit to ideas held by proponents of the new-fangled "progressive education."

Captain Bob believed in the basics of old fashioned, classical education. He felt that most schoolboys were inherent knuckleheads, mischievous, unruly and unreliable; that immature minds were irresponsible minds; that 14 year olds, and even 16 year olds, were incapable of choosing wisely their needs in education; that what they needed, above all, was firm and unremitting guidance. He believed in discipline, in rules, in repetitive study and in hard study. The protests and riots of the Sixties, the drug experimentation, the permissiveness and the preoccupation with "rights" of adolescent students in the Seventies would have turned the few remaining hairs on his balding head even grayer and precipitated even more horrendous attacks of his periodic migraines.

By modern standards, Captain Perrin's New Orleans Academy (NOA) would be condemned on many counts: its premises could never have passed fire and sanitation standards, its classrooms were dingy, its facilities were inadequate, its curriculum was limited, its faculty had no special degrees in education.

The entire Academy, four grades of grammar school and four grades of high school, was situated a block from St. Charles Avenue in "uptown" New Orleans on a corner lot that measured, at most, 150 by 200 feet. The four high school grades occupied the four front rooms (two upstairs, two downstairs) of an old, gray, three-story, wooden frame house, the back half of which served as a residence for the Captain and his buxom wife, Bosie. Behind the house, and separated from it by a small courtyard and walkway, was the "new school," a one-story, raised frame building, which housed the 5th through 8th grades. In some shed-like attachments to the side and rear of the elementary school were located the semi-outdoor lunch counter and cafeteria kitchen, an "armory" where the drill rifles were kept, the school "latrine" and the redolent athletic locker room with its one shower. The playground, drill field and athletic field (all one and the same) occupied the remainder of the lot to the right, paralleling the buildings. This open area, scuffed by hundreds of marching and playing feet, was without a blade of grass—an expanse of packed wet dirt and puddles during the rains and inches deep in smothering dust during the infrequent dry spells. Along the side fence and overhanging the right rear of the drill

ground was a monster mulberry tree, which, in season, discolored the sandy dirt with purple blotches and left its indelible marks on the seats of countless faded khaki pants.

There were modern-type, single-unit desks in the new elementary school, but in the high school rooms, the ancient, wooden desks with bookshelf beneath had wrought iron legs and a folding drop seat in front, intimately joining the scholar to his classmates fore and aft. The worn desktops with their empty inkwell holes were an intricate filigree of deep pits, scratches, initials and designs carved into posterity by restless cadets of classes gone before. The senior classroom was on the bottom floor to the rear and opened, at back, through two ceiling-to-floor sash windows onto a tired wooden porch elevated a few steps above the courtyard and its cluster of banana trees. A small study next to the senior classroom, and reached by way of the open porch, was converted into a school "library" in 1930. Although there was central heating in the grammar school, the high school rooms each had only a small, grate fireplace set into a dull, white, marble slab mantle, alongside of which rested a coal-filled tin scuttle and an iron poker with coiled steel handle. In return for the comfort of welcome heat on cold days, the cadet whose desk stood beside the fireplace automatically drew the duty as class fireman.

In 1928, when we enrolled in NOA as a high school freshman, the average number of students in each class was limited to approximately twenty-four to twenty-eight. It would have been impossible to crowd more than that number of desks into the small classrooms. But the depression years that soon followed took a severe toll. Nine finished in the class ahead, and only thirteen of us graduated in 1932.

The cadets all wore khaki uniforms with stiff canvas leggings throughout the year. On reaching the junior year, the canvas leggings were replaced by leather ones, and a dark, leather belt was added. The exalted seniors were further distinguished by Sam Browne belts and officer pips on their shoulders. The Senior Officer-of-the-Day was set apart and glamorized by a long, maroon sash with two hanging tassels, worn draped from one shoulder and around the waist under the Sam Browne.

Throughout all the grades from the 7th on, the basic curriculum consisted of five subjects: English, French, Latin, mathematics and history. There were no "electives" until the junior year. At that time, the choice was to drop French and take Spanish, or stop Latin and take two final years of Greek. If there were such things as course credits, no one knew of them. We took five subjects, were expected to pass them all, and that was it. There was a required, one-hour session of military drill each afternoon, which—along with activities such as working on the school paper, *The Bugle*; playing in the ten-piece marching band; and participating in athletics—was an extracurricular pursuit that earned nothing toward graduation.

We had to be at school by 8:40 in the morning in time for the morning assembly formation. Classes were from 9:00 to 12:00, and from 1:00 to 3:00. At 3:10 we assembled on the drill field, and for the next hour under the stern eye of Captain Perrin, we marched, practiced the manual of arms, and polished our close order drill. Football practice for the school team followed drill in the fall and basketball followed in the winter months. In spring, track and field practice was carried on partially on the drill field and partially at the old Tulane Stadium several miles away. There were also tennis and golf teams—chiefly organized by the cadets wherever, however, and as best they could.

The four teachers in the elementary school were all women, the four in the high school, all men. Classes remained in their respective rooms throughout the day with the teachers changing on the hour. We stood at attention until the order "Seats," was given as the teachers entered and left the room. Captain Bob taught English and the first two years of Latin. Mr. Reinecke taught French and supervised efforts on the school paper. Mr. LaPrairie taught math in all its phases from algebra onward through the geometries, trigonometry and simple calculus. Mr. Harris, a man for all seasons, taught History and Civics, Spanish, advanced Latin and Greek and, in his spare time, coached football, basketball, track, golf and tennis.

As a military school, even if it was only a day school that ignored all military theory and subjects except drill, it had, of course, a demerit system. In the classrooms during the play and lunch hour and at drill sessions, demerits were handed out by all teachers and by the senior cadet who drew the day's duty as OR for infractions of behavior, deportment, truancy, insubordination and general orneriness. A certain number of demerits were allowed per week, and if exceeded, a special three-hour session held every Saturday morning was the penalty.

There was no honor system in effect or needed, since we were at all times under the watchful eyes of our room mentors. In addition, Captain Perrin, whom all of us held in mortal fear, had the habit of leaving his class with a writing assignment and wandering around to all of the classrooms at least once or twice a day to peer balefully through the open doors and point an accusing finger at some doodling daydreamer or a couple of scuffling seatmates at the back of the room. At the creak of a floorboard in the hall, the sibilant warning, "Cheese it! Here comes Creeping Jesus!" would sweep the room and bring saintly order to sometime chaos. Mr. Reinecke, second in command (a no-nonsense man with a caustic tongue and affectionately known as "The Frog"), was also an effective and stern disciplinarian. Both Mr. LaPrairie and Mr. Harris were younger, milder and more tolerant—although Mr. Harris, with a volatile temper and perhaps because of his athletic talents, was deadly accurate at bouncing chalk or blackboard erasers off cadet

heads at twelve paces.

But it was really Captain Perrin's school. He was the Lord Master, the supreme authority, and he brooked no interference. Once when an eager, helpful young matron entranced by the new Parent Teacher Association idea just then beginning to be in vogue, offered to start one for the Academy, Captain Bob looked at her with obvious distaste and annoyance and said, "Your responsibility is to see that your son gets here in time for formation in the morning, to see that he gets home after drill in the afternoon, and to make sure he does his homework at night. The rest of it, I handle."

Practically 100% of the Captain's graduates went on to college. Our lack of training in such froth as high school chemistry and physics, biology, manual arts, dramatics, debating and other time-occupying subjects of popular social relevance apparently made no difference in our performance at the universities. An unfailing and extremely high percentage of the Captain's boys every year reaped the highest academic honors at colleges like Tulane, Virginia, Princeton, Harvard and other prestigious institutions. It must have given the old boy great satisfaction to follow the progress of his graduates and see the results of his training. It is too bad that the elementary and secondary education teaching standards of today have drifted so far away from the sound principles in which he so firmly believed.

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