

Looking for Bernard Knox: Warrior, Ancient and Modern

Looking for Bernard Knox enlightened my understanding of war and also my knowledge about humanity. Knox devoted his life, through action, word, and thought to explaining humanity. As a young man, he chose to fight in the Spanish Civil War and World War II, and later spent his life studying, teaching, writing, and promoting ancient Greek and Roman literature. These experiences, uniquely embodied in this one man, may provide all of us a window to warfare, both in the ancient and modern worlds. Knox's experience with war's irrationality in the 20th Century and his studies on ancient warfare show us revealing similarities with the ancient Greek hero's irrationality. The modern ideologies engaged in bitterly devastating wars during the 20th Century, leaving tens of millions dead. But what was the core of the argument? Perhaps it can be found in the literature and debates of the Ancient Greeks. Plato energetically argues against the idea that man is the center of all things. Plato's argument could take a similar tone if lodged against Hitler. The ideas implemented after the Enlightenment, when looked at in their simplest form would sound the same to the ancients. Bernard Knox's experiences and writing reveals such similarities and therefore, that humanity's basic nature remains remarkably unchanged.

Discovering "Captain Bernard M. W. Knox"¹ while doing research for my masters thesis in history proved to be a longer journey than I anticipated, a very enjoyable and satisfying journey and I've not minded making it. I wanted to write on Allied operations during World War II supporting the French resistance and came upon operation "Jedburgh." Composed of a French officer, a British or American officer, and an enlisted radioman from any one of the three nations, these teams coordinated resistance actions. Beginning on D-Day and continuing until the Allies pushed Germany out of France; the Jedburghs coordinated, supplied, trained, and equipped the French resistance behind the German lines. Such operations are dangerous to say the least and the men who performed that mission were known for their bravery, tenacity, independence, and imagination. Among these 300 plus men was one man I became fascinated with because he made a career after the war studying

and writing about ancient Greek and Roman literature. I wondered what made him do something so starkly different, so academic, so un-soldier like? Soon I also discovered that World War II was not his only combat experience. He fought Francisco Franco's army in Spain serving in one of the International Brigades. I thought Knox must have some stories to tell, and he does.

At the Front Line

Born during WWI to a father who fought at Passchendaele, Knox attended a London grammar school where he learned French. With that first experience, and poor grades in nearly all other subjects, Knox began his long journey learning foreign languages. He soon began Latin, dabbled in Russian, and attempted Greek on his own until caught studying it during his other classes. The impressed master offered to tutor him in Greek. In 1933 he began his studies at St. John's College, Cambridge with a generous scholarship based on his examination score. In addition to his studies he participated in military training. This would later pay off, as he learned how to use the Lee-Enfield rifle, to operate the Lewis machine gun, and to send Morse code. The other soldierly qualities the instructors attempted to pass on to Knox evidently only landed him in trouble as he was not the most exemplary looking soldier and rebelled against the strict rules often earning extra training.²

With the Depression in full swing, scarce jobs, and an ineffectual government, the extreme ideologies filled 1930s Cambridge with demonstrations, political clubs, and raucous arguments. "He [John Cornford, a good friend of Knox's] was a communist," stated Knox to me in June 2001. "So was I at that point. I didn't join anything. . . ." but the situation was so bad in Britain and the government refused to do anything about it. "At least over here Roosevelt tried to do something." Politics embroiled Cambridge University in the extreme views of both the Left and the Right. Funded by the Italian Fascist dictator Benito Mussolini, the "black shirts" staged demonstrations and marches in Cambridge, London, and other cities often provoking wide spread reaction.³

Inspired by the politics, coaxed on by his good friend John Cornford, Knox decided to go to Spain and fight in their Civil War. By the fall of 1937, Francisco Franco's army appeared to be near victory. The Republican forces opposing him hoped they could prevail, but were hopelessly disjointed, poorly equipped, inadequately trained, and composed of such disparate groups they were on the ropes. Knox and seven or eight Cambridge friends traveled to Paris where they linked up with twenty other Britons and found themselves placed in a machine gun company of the French battalion, XI International Brigade. He arrived in Madrid laboring under the weight of his newly issued, clumsy, and hopelessly obsolete machine gun on November 8,

1936 as Franco's forces regrouped and renewed their attack.⁴

"In Spain," writes Knox quoting from *The Passionate War* by Peter Wyden, "the world was choosing sides for the years to come."⁵ Anarchists, socialists, communists of many varieties, Basques, Catalans, and scores of foreign soldiers came loosely together under the "Republican" banner out of their anti-fascist ideals. Basing a cause on being against something is always a tenuous situation at best and with no official backing from the democratic nations and with an effective Italian blockade of Soviet war supplies, the problems were numerous. Nevertheless, Knox and his brothers in arms attempted to keep Franco from taking Madrid. Placed in Madrid's University City neighborhood, Knox dodged deadly accurate sniper fire and cursed their clumsy machine gun. Knox described the weapon as a French gun that took three men to operate and forced the shooter into a seat and the rest of the crew spun him toward one target after another. Such a weapon provided Franco's Moroccan snipers an easy target. When asked by the commanding general what they needed, they quickly replied a better machine gun. General Kléber, a Hungarian Red Army General asked if they could use Lewis guns and the British emphatically replied that they could indeed. The weapons arrived the next day in a rare occurrence of responsive logistics in Knox's war.⁶

The war was not a long one for him, but it left its mark. During a brutally cold December day, while attempting to blunt a Franco offensive at Boadilla del Monte near Madrid, a bullet struck him in the neck and shoulder. His comrades, who thought him beyond hope and left him for dead, were stunned when he made it back to their lines. While recuperating in a hospital he mourned the loss of his many friends including his recruiter, John Cornford who perished in the fighting near Cordova. Of the sixteen British soldiers who marched into Madrid on 8 November, "eight were dead and three were badly wounded" by the last day of December.⁷ The emotional torment that the twenty-one year old Knox must have felt after having such searing experiences is demonstrated by his prodigious and revealing book reviews concerning the Spanish Civil War. Many of these reviews concern Ancient Greek and Roman literature but some of his best have to do with books about the Spanish Civil War. With such literary participants as George Orwell, Ernest Hemingway, André Malraux, and Antoine de Saint-Exupéry writing about their experiences the war's passions become evident. Knox admits his torment when quoting in one of those reviews from "Albert Camus who summed it up for all of us who still mourn the Republic. 'It was in Spain,' he wrote in 1946, 'that men learned that one can be right and yet be beaten, that force can defeat spirit, that there are times when courage is not its own reward. It is this no doubt, which explains why so many men, the world over, feel the Spanish drama as a personal tragedy.'"⁸

Knox and his friends continued the ideological argument beyond the Cambridge streets by fighting in Spain. They lost, but the political argument continued throughout the world. Hitler himself finished off the Cambridge fascists by declaring war on Britain, providing all British subjects with a clear and definite nationalism. But by that time, Knox was an American and would have to wait four years to renew his participation.

Behind the Lines

Back in Britain and renewing his studies, Knox met, or rather re-met Bianca, an American woman he knew from his Cambridge days and they fell in love. Despite his current waywardness and lack of job prospects they decided to marry. Disgusted by the British government's continued appeasement, and the insistence by his prospective in-laws that they come to America, they married in April, 1939 in New Jersey. Knox landed a position, he had "always hoped to avoid," and began work in a Connecticut private school teaching Latin while Bianca worked on her first book. December 7, 1941 changed that. Knox worked to overcome his non-citizenship and enlisted in the United States Army, receiving the exact same pay as his meager teaching salary – fifty dollars a month. Bianca found a far higher paying job building Navy planes. Nicknamed "Limey" by his fellow recruits he went from one Army training post after another and found it rewarding to be so immersed in American life. The Army decided he could be of better use as an officer and sent him to Officer Training School followed by an assignment back in Britain as a B-17 base Air Defense Officer. Bored with this duty Knox repeatedly sought a more interesting assignment hoping his fluent French would rescue him. Finally word came of an interview with the London detachment of the Office of Strategic Services. The OSS served as the intelligence function for the United States and also performed sabotage. It sought out men such as Knox with language abilities and a penchant for troublemaking. His boring duty was over as the OSS sent him to a base near Peterborough to join other Americans, British, and French who were forming a unit known as Operation JEDBURGH.⁹

The 300 or so officers and men trained at this British run commando school from March 1944, until they parachuted into France beginning in June and ending in September. A typical mission contacted local resistance forces, arranged for weapons via air drop, trained the resistance, and ran guerrilla operations against the German army. The three men may have to operate behind the lines for months and needed to have an independent streak and as Knox wrote they were men tested by psychologists to make sure they would be, "incapable of remaining quiet - troublemakers, in fact; people who could be relied on to upset apple carts."¹⁰

You may recognize some of their names: William Colby who later direct-

ed the CIA; John K. Singlaub who commanded American Special Forces in Vietnam; The *Newsweek* columnist Stewart Alsop; Lucien Conien, the legendary CIA agent in Vietnam; and among the French and British they are equally accomplished in their respective nations.

Captain Knox, with a French Captain Paul Grall and a British sergeant Gordon Tack formed team GILES and parachuted into Brittany on July 8 1944. Within moments they began to link up with the local resistance, who even in this rural and heavily Catholic part of France were mostly, but in name only, Communists. Knox's team set to work finding drop zones, training the resistance soldiers, coordinating with various local leaders, but most of the time evading the German army. Ordered not to begin any major offensive action until given the word by Special Forces Headquarters in London, they constantly had to restrain the energetic and overly eager French not to stage any major attacks. Headquarters and GILES feared a premature attack would achieve only sudden and severe German reprisals. Their location in relation to the Normandy invasion put them to the west of the conventional forces. While west was not the direction the Allied armies wished to go, that area needed to be secure in order to avoid the Germans enveloping Eisenhower's forces. Eisenhower wanted teams such as GILES to sabotage valuable transportation and communication sites and to harass the German army should the opportunity present itself, in other words to be troublemakers. As Knox wrote many years later, the psychologists "delivered the goods."¹¹

In early August, Sergeant Tack received the BBC message on his radio set to begin using the French Resistance forces in large scale action. Knox and his two commandos began to coordinate a more open effort and with the Allied conventional forces closing in on their position the Germans began to congregate and move east in order to fight General George Patton's forces. However, operating on roads and in large formations only made them tempting bait for the region's always angry, and now heavily armed, and organized resistance. When Knox could not get at them he requested air strikes as the Germans, exhausted and mauled, received orders from Hitler to return to the coast and destroy port facilities. But by mid-August, GILES linked up with other commando teams and conventional American units under George Patton's Third Army and had the remaining Germans trapped in Brest. Meanwhile, most of Patton's forces aggressively pressed east toward Paris. By the time Knox's team returned to Britain on September 9, he believed he had, by his rough estimate, coordinated the actions of and armed 2000 French resistance fighters.¹²

"Between the Lines"

While awaiting reassignment, the OSS returned many of the American

Jedburghs to Washington, D. C. The brass wanted to send all the Jedburghs to China but Knox begged for another European mission as Bianca had gone through unbelievable anguish the entire time he had been in France when she heard nothing from him. Now pregnant, she did not want to go through that again. The OSS agreed and in early 1945 he boarded a plane back to Europe with orders which stated on the envelope, "Not to be opened until the aircraft reaches the height of 10,000 feet." Always entertained by this type of "Hollywood" OSS procedure, Knox shared this with the sergeant flight attendant and asked to be informed when they reached that altitude. The NCO signaled and Knox opened his orders and discovered his destination: Naples, Italy. Knox wrote later, "Apparently the OSS moguls in Washington figured that anyone who could speak French could also speak Italian." Knox picked up Italian easily enough as his Latin, French, and Spanish formed the basis for quick learning.¹³

Making his way north toward Florence he saw the devastated war-torn countryside made worse by the dreary winter rains. The Germans and the remnants of Mussolini's forces fought bitterly over the peninsula against the Allies and their new found friends the Italian Communist forces (or anyone who hated the fascists). Italy appeared thoroughly decimated. By early 1945, the number of fascist haters grew rapidly and Knox was to find and work with those who could advance Allied progress. Taking up his new task meant working "between the lines" with Italian partisans or more specifically with former smugglers who knew the mountain passes and possessed the physical strength to work through the mountains, performing reconnaissance on German movements. Teamed with Italian-Americans whose local language skills were better,

Knox served in this capacity until the end of the European war.¹⁴

It was very different work and perhaps the most chaotic of all his combat experiences. The OSS ordered them to take the heights immediately opposite their current position and capture a small town called Fasano. Their partisan-guided patrols spent the bulk of the proceeding weeks going back and forth into German held territory on unmarked paths known by the Italian smugglers now working with Knox's team. These operations often brought back prisoners as well as information on German positions. Tramping about the northern Italian hills and mountains without vehicles, radios, paved roads, or aircraft, it appeared to Knox to be war from another century. Reminiscent of ancient warfare, they could get very close to the enemy and find themselves in dangerous situations. Such instances drive soldiers to reflect on what they should spend life doing. For Bernard Knox, a turning point happened while in a ruined house waiting for a flanking party to take out a German machine gun nest pinning down his party. He found amidst the dusty rubble a text of Virgil. A "gilt edged book lying under a patina of brick dust and bro-

ken glass.” Knox wondered if he “could still read this stuff?” Also recalling that in medieval Europe Virgil was thought to have been a kind of fortune teller, “Virgilian lottery – it was called. You opened the book at random, and the passage you put your finger on foretold your future.”¹⁵ Knox opened it, randomly chose a passage and read:

Here right and wrong are reversed; so many wars in the world, so many faces of evil. The plow is despised and rejected; the farmers marched off, the fields untended. The curving sickles are beaten straight to make swords. On one side the East moves to war, on the other, Germany. Neighboring cities tear up their treaties and take to arms; the vicious war god rages the world over.

Written in the last century before the birth of Christ, these lines certainly sounded like the modern, war-torn and weary 20th century world Knox knew. The flanking party had taken out the enemy’s machine gun and it was time to go. He attempted to fit the book in his pack but it was too big. Leaving it behind and running forward he promised himself, “If I ever get out of this, I’m going back to the classics and study them seriously.”¹⁶

In the Lines

Obviously, and thankfully, he did survive and applied to Yale to study the classics. Despite being thought of as a “pre-mature anti-fascist,” by one of the faculty, they accepted him and he completed his doctorate in 1948. Yale hired him and he taught Thucydides in translation and marveled at how, with the Greek Civil War raging and the opening years of the Cold War, something 2500 years old could so precisely reveal the power, politics, and humanity of the present. Further exploring the ancient heroes he studied, mastered, and wrote books and essays on Sophoclean tragedies, plays in which the hero poses as much of a problem for his enemies as he does his friends. His book *The Heroic Temper: Studies in Sophoclean Tragedy* explains what a hero was to the ancient Greeks.¹⁷ His many essays have appeared in various publications such as the *New York Review of Books*, the *New Republic*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, and other more scholarly journals. The best of these he published in *Essays: Ancient and Modern* and won a prize from the international writers association PEN for the art of the essay.

I stated in the beginning that I first found Bernard Knox as a part of my graduate work. I have to admit that if I had been observant enough, I would have found him eight years earlier. While assigned in Michigan in 1991, I bought a copy of Robert Fagles’ translation of *The Iliad*. Settling down to begin it during a snow storm some stodgy academic (I thought) named

Bernard Knox confronted me with a daunting sixty-three page introduction. I skipped it and went straight for the Homer. It took a coincidental comment by a good friend of my graduate advisor years later to make the link for me that Bernard Knox, the Jedburgh was the same man. "Have you read the Fagles' translation of the Iliad?" he asked. I said that I had and he said, "it's the same Knox writing that introduction."¹⁸ I was ashamed of my youthful impatience and vowed to read that introduction.

Since then I have read and re-read it, spurred on by the belief that within those lines is the essence of what combat, war, and humanity are all about. In those lines must exist some reference to defending Madrid, some tell tale clue to what it was like as a Jedburgh fighting the Nazis, working with the Italian partisans in the rugged mountains of war ravaged Europe, parading on the Cambridge parks against the Mussolini-funded Fascists, and perhaps in it all a greater sense of the modern ideologies.

I am not the only person to be struck by Knox's life and wonder if such things could be found in his writing on the Greeks and Romans, or as one of his books calls them, *The Oldest Dead White European Males*. While a graduate student at Yale in the late 1950s, Robert Fagles also admired Knox, "all of us had heard of him, knew something about his work and war record and wanted to take his classes." Fagles took Knox's class on Sophocles' *Ajax* and the student has now become a friend, colleague, and collaborator. To his academic profession Knox is the "Gold Standard . . . the master of the ancient and the modern. . . (who) has a remarkable gift for making the complex clear." And using T. E. Lawrence's words about Homer, Fagles says "I aspire most fervently in him." The two have written three books together and are working on their fourth.¹⁹

Did the ancient world differ from ours? Does their peace resemble our peace and does their war resemble our war? In other words, has man progressed any, at all? Knox, after having spent time in these questions writes tellingly about this in the Introduction to Fagles' acclaimed translation of Homer's *Iliad*. His touchstone for war and peace is Homer's character Achilles, who insulted and angry, refuses to fight alongside his fellow Greeks against the Trojans. Being their greatest warrior, this is a benefit to his enemy but that fact does not concern Achilles until after the insult is rectified. Knox points out that Achilles is half god and half man. He acted as an ancient Greek god acted, selfishly and with no concern to the overall outcome of the war, a war that is a human affair. The universe has him at its center and satisfaction of his godlike rage is what matters to Achilles. Later in the poem, Achilles changes to become more human. He sets about venerating a dear slain friend with the most elaborate ancient customs: games, contests, prizes, sacrifices, and orations for his honored comrade. Achilles also anticipates Priam's rage over his dead son Hector, and therefore orders Hector's body

prepared for a funeral out his father Priam's sight. Achilles can sense the feelings of another man and acts humanely out of respect, even for this enemy.²⁰

Could Achilles' godlike trait be applied to such 20th century personalities as Hitler, Mussolini, and Stalin? Their twisting of enlightenment thought and centrality of focus on modern man conjures up the ancient Greek argument between Plato and Protagoras: "Mankind is the measure of all things." Knox explains that Plato "rails against" this idea and Knox himself notes the idea is, "a very dangerous one."²¹ Evidently, Friedrich Nietzsche deconstructs the Socratic idea of logos to derive his "superman." So we see such modern ideas are not entirely modern at all as they have been explained to us in Homer's poetry.

Knox goes on to note, "Homer's evocation of battle which make it unique: an exquisite balance between the celebration of war's tragic, heroic values and those creative values of civilized life that war destroys." Achilles' heroism is the pattern for ancient Greek literature. Sophoclean theatre highlights the lone hero who runs against the tide of his or her society to force an issue they hold dear. Knox explains that Achilles is their model. Such a profound model that even the peaceful and retiring Socrates, on trial for his life, employs Achilles' words and says "Then let me die at once" rather than "sit by the ships. . . / a useless, dead weight on the good green earth." Knox teaches us that Socrates' use of the warrior's lines should not be so surprising as the philosopher was "hewing to a solitary line" just as Achilles did and therefore "the bloodstained warrior and the gentle philosopher live and die in the same heroic, and tragic, pattern."²² Bloodstained warrior and gentle philosopher, two aspects of life Knox would know a great deal about.

Fighting against Fascism in Spain, France, and Italy put Knox in the heat of the argument concerning the extreme 20th century ideologies. When did these ideologies begin? The modern historian often thinks of them incubating in the Enlightenment, but it is apparent they began at the beginning.²³ Knox shows us that the ancients dealt with the same issues when he explains Achilles' motives. Achilles is the hero who holds his concerns above those of his nation's with no consideration for the consequences. All this shows us, like the saying in Ecclesiastes, that there is "nothing new under the sun." In Greek, "*panton metron antropos estin*" or "mankind is the measure of all things" and how mankind progresses, it is clear, is not contingent on ideology and certainly not technology but the realization of the "danger" of this trait of self absorption; not only within the individual but within all mankind. And when mankind, imprisoned by such ideologies as fascism, communism, anarchy, and godlike pride, believes its progress is determined by its actions alone the consequences become calamity.

Notes

1. OSS/London: Special Operations Branch and Secret Intelligence Branch War Diaries. Microfilm. Frederick, MD: University Publications of America, 1985. Volume 11, page 623. Microfilm personnel records list his name and basic biographical record.
2. Bernard Knox, "Pre-mature anti-fascist" [address on-line] Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives – Bill Susman Lecture Series. (New York University, 1998, accessed 22 February 2002); available at http://www.alba-alb.org/lectures/1998_knox_bernard.html; Internet and Bernard Knox, *Essays: Ancient and Modern* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), pp. xi-xiii.
3. Bernard Knox, interview by author, tape recording, Darnestown Maryland, June 8 2001.
4. Ibid., and Bernard Knox, "Remembering Madrid." *The New York Review of Books*, November 6 1980.
5. Bernard Knox, "Everybody but Shakespeare" *New Republic*, August 8 1983.
6. Bernard Knox, interview. General Kléber is a *nom de guerre* for Lazar Stern, a Hungarian Jew Stalin later ordered shot. See Beevor, Antony. *The Spanish Civil War*. (New York: Penguin Books, 1982) p. 127.
7. Bernard Knox, *Essays* p. xx, "Remembering Madrid" *The New York Review of Books*, November 6, 1980, and Bill Susman Lecture.
8. Bernard Knox, "The Spanish Tragedy," *The New York Review of Books*, March 26 1987. Knox quotes Camus from Frederick R. Benson, *Writers in Arms*, (New York: NYU Press, 1967) pp. 52-53.
9. Bernard Knox, *Essays* pp xx-xxii and Knox interview.
10. Bernard Knox, *Essays* p xxiii.
11. Bernard Knox, *Essays* p. xxiii and Benjamin F. Jones, *The Moon is Down: The Jedburghs and Support to the French Resistance*, M. A. Thesis, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 1999.
12. Jones, *The Moon is Down* and Knox, interview.
13. Bernard Knox, *Essays*, p. xxix.
14. Ibid., page xxx and Knox, interview.
15. Knox, *Essays*, pp xxx.
16. Ibid., p xxxi-xxxii
17. Knox, Bill Susman Lecture and *Essays*, xxxii-xxxiii.
18. Roger Spiller, conversation with author, Leavenworth, KS, January 28 1999.
19. Robert Fagles, telephone conversation with author, January 17 2002.
20. Homer, *The Iliad*. Translated by Robert Fagles with Introduction and Notes by Bernard Knox. (New York: Viking Penguin. 1990) pp 45-61.

21. Knox, interview.

22. Homer, *The Iliad*. pp 63-64.

23. For an in depth and exhaustive work on modern ideologies see James Billington's *Fire in the Minds of Men: The Origins of the Revolutionary Faith*. (New York: Basic Books, 1980).

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