

Infantryman Trunec's Cap

I

At the beginning of October, a new recruit by the name of Trunec started his three years of military service in the infantry. He was a mountain of a man and his head rested proudly on a massive pair of shoulders. He had the neck of an ox and the head of a giant.

On the day he first arrived at the barracks, he went for a medical and was taken, with all the other recruits, before an NCO who questioned him, as he did everyone else, about his home circumstances. They do this in order to instil into our soldiers a feeling of trust towards the military. Then, having aroused their faith in the army, they took the recruits off to the Stores to get them kitted out.

The Quartermaster Sergeant scrutinised them one after the other and called out: 'Boots, No. 3, Trousers, 6, Tunic, No. 2.' Four corporals then brought boots, trousers and tunic to the recruit in question, whose sizes the QMS had estimated by eye, without bothering his head about whether the things would fit. So one man had boots in which he could have accommodated another two feet of his size, while another couldn't have got his feet into his boots to save his life, not even if he'd taken a plane and shaved half of each foot off. Another recruit could have got his elder brother into his trousers with him and yet another had a tunic into which he could have squeezed two more frames as skinny as his own. But this was the army and the number that the QMS called out was the one that applied. Then they were issued with their caps. These come in about six sizes, ranging from the biggest head to the smallest. The cap-issue was a shambles as well, but what can you do?

Then they all went to their barrack-room and got changed. It was a sight to reduce strong men to tears. A roomful of figures who had become unrecognisable one to the other. The hut was swarming with men whose hands had disappeared inside their tunics, men with their trousers dragging along the floor, men with their caps down over their ears. And on the other hand, there were men with their trousers up to

their knees, so that you could see their underpants, arms protruding from the sleeves of tunics from the elbows down and in many cases, caps swaying precariously to and fro on their owners' heads. Where one part of the Company had a surplus, the other was deficient.

When the QMS caught sight of these interesting little groups, he nodded his head benevolently and said: 'There you are, lads, that's how variable the dimensions of the human body are. This man's got longer arms than he ought to have, that one has them shorter. It's the same with the legs. And the chest; well, it hardly bears thinking about. This one can't do his tunic up, and that one hangs inside his like a picture of the Crucifixion. But it'll all come out in the wash. You'll just have to exchange clothes amongst yourselves. And let me tell you, a soldier's got to look as if he's just come out of a bandbox; smartly turned out at all times. Anything funny about the way he looks, and he's on a charge.'

And so they exchanged boots, tunics, trousers and caps with their neighbours until there was just the one giant recruit, Trunec, left. He stuck out like a sore thumb in trousers that were too short for him and a tunic he couldn't do up; like a strange creature from an alien planet with a tiny cap cowering timorously on its head. The others, it's true, looked odd as well, but this one, Private Trunec, looked as if he had come from another world.

Trunec pleaded with them not to leave him in this state. The army has one answer to problems like this: 'Get on with it! Quick March!'

Trunec then turned to his corporal who was moved by his pleas and took him down to the Stores again where, after much searching, they did manage to find some bits and pieces of uniform that gave Trunec some sort of passing resemblance to a soldier. But the cap, alas! - the biggest cap they had - was swallowed up in that vast expanse of head like a grain of sand in the ocean.

And so it came to pass that the whole matter of his cap went all the way up to the Quartermaster-General's Office in Vienna.

It happened this way. The first duty of a soldier is to learn how to salute, by which means he shows respect to his superiors.

Private Trunec, with a cap that jumped about on his head like a ball bouncing about on the floor, could not with the best will in the world find the peak of his cap which, according to regulations, he had to touch when saluting.

These attempts of his to catch the peak of his cap were desperate affairs, for the slightest movement would send the cap slithering to the

back of his head.

The sergeant was ready to tear his hair and the officer cursed and went puce with rage whenever, during these terrifying attempts at a salute, the wretched man's cap fell from his head to the ground.

In distraction, the red-faced Private Trunec would push it over one ear, which occasioned muffled laughter in the ranks and renewed outbursts of wrath on the part of the officer and the sergeant.

What were they to do with him?

Finally, the officer had the corporal take Private Trunec to the Company Office. Looking like a drunk, with his cap bobbing up and down, and ignorant of what was to befall, Trunec made his way with faltering steps to the Office.

When they got to the office, the duty clerk, on hearing the corporal's report, had Trunec taken to the Captain. The Captain took the report seriously. First of all, he asked Trunec whether he had water on the brain and when the latter said politely that No sir, he didn't have any water, Sir, the Captain ordered that the cap be soaked in water and forced on to Trunec's head. He said that this would cause the cap to stretch and that Trunec must keep it on his head for a whole day. To this end, Trunec was shut in the cells for twenty-four hours, so that no-one should disturb him (this, of course, was not a punishment).

Trunec sat there on his bunk, clinging devotedly to the cap on his head, until eventually he fell asleep with fatigue. When he got up next morning, the cap was lying beside him on the bunk, every bit as small and even more wrinkled. And this was the biggest cap the regiment had.

He put it back on his head and practised holding it in a balanced position, but it didn't do any good. The cap bounced about as it had on the previous day.

It had split and Trunec had to report to his Company Office a second time.

This time, the Captain took the matter even more seriously. He ordered the sergeant to take the measurements of the Trunec head. It turned out to have a circumference of sixty-two centimetres. Then the Captain said sternly to Trunec that the whole thing was going to have to go up to the Quartermaster-General's Office in Vienna. What did he mean by it, coming into the world with a head like that? Then he was dismissed. Outside, they rammed the cap back on his head and later it was re-sewn by the tailor and Trunec went on with his training, thankful not to have been put in the guardhouse.

II

After Trunec had gone, the Captain dictated a letter to the Company Clerk:

To the Office of His Imperial Majesty's Quartermaster-General,
Vienna:

Sir,

The undersigned Third Company of the Twelfth Regiment respectfully requests the Quartermaster General's Office, in view of the fact that Infantryman Jan Trunec, born in Pelhřimov, domiciled in Kadan', possesses a head of abnormal size, to send a cap large enough to accommodate the dimensions of the head of the said infantryman.

Then the Captain signed the document with his own hand, a copy went into the files and the letter was received the next day by the Quartermaster-General's Office.

Two weeks later, Infantryman Trunec was called again to the Company Office, where he had his head measured yet once more, for that day a reply had arrived from the Quartermaster-General's Office in Vienna, to wit:

To the Third Company, Twelfth Regiment:

With ref. doc. 6728/891 IIab/6721/345g III a 8 IV, the undersigned Quartermaster General's Office finds itself compelled to draw attention to the following:

The communication received from the Third Company of the Twelfth Regiment, No. 6728/891 IIab/6721/345g III a 8 IV in which a request is made to the Quartermaster-General's Office for the supply of a cap to Infantryman Jan Trunec of that same Company, domiciled in Kadan', born in Pelhřimov, because the aforesaid infantryman has a head of abnormal size, omits to give details of the dimensions of the head of the said infantryman. We request immediate notification of the aforesaid dimensions of the infantryman's abnormal head.

(....)

Commanding Officer,
Quartermaster-General's Office, Vienna

'Cor!' said the Company Clerk. 'You ain't 'alf giving us a 'ard time!' Then he wrote back that the head measured sixty-two centimetres and sent the letter off to Vienna. Two weeks later a new communication from Vienna arrived in the Company Office:

The undersigned Quartermaster-General's Office in Vienna requests, with ref. document 6829/351/IIg IIIId 3321 duly received here, information as to the date of birth of the said infantryman with the abnormal head and the year of service in which he currently stands, for the possibility that the head of the said infantryman might increase in size cannot be ruled out.

The Company Clerk notified them of the date of birth and that it was the first year of military service. Two months later, the following document arrived from Vienna:

To the Third Company, Twelfth Regiment:

We request herewith the immediate dispatch of the original cap issued to Infantryman Trunec, to prevent accounting difficulties and to enable us to send a cap in exchange.

Three months later, a new communication arrived:

The undersigned Quartermaster-General's Office confirms herewith receipt of the original cap issued to Infantryman Trunec, which has arrived in a damaged condition. You are hereby ordered to conduct an enquiry for the purpose of establishing how the cap in question came to be damaged. On conclusion of the enquiry, the Quartermaster-General's Office will, in accordance with para. 16 of Army Supply Regulations, invite tenders for the provision of a new cap with a circumference of sixty-two cm. for the abnormal head of Infantryman Trunec.

III

Letter from the Third Company of the Twelfth Regiment to the Quartermaster-General's Office in Vienna:

It has been established by an enquiry carried out by this Company that Infantryman Trunec received the cap which was sent to Vienna for

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exchange in a completely undamaged condition. Since, however, as has been established by the testimony of witnesses, he did not treat it with the respect properly due to War Department property, he caused damage to it in consequence. The said infantryman has, however, died in the interim and we therefore request the return of the original cap issued to Jan Trunec, the infantryman with the abnormal head.

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