The Scope of Military Instruction in Schools.

[Extract of a lecture delivered by Captain John Bigelow, Jr., before The American Association for the Advancement of Physical Education.]

The scope of military instruction in schools may be looked at from two standpoints. From a public or patriotic point of view the question arises, How much does it contribute to the military strength of the nation? From a private or selfish standpoint we inquire, How much does it aid a young man to prepare for the battle of life?

As a patriotic measure, military instruction should, it seems to me, be regarded as a preparation for service in the militia, and should consist both of instruction and discipline. Judging from the young men who come from military schools to the Institute of Technology, I should say that the training in such schools is very superficial, and the results are much less than they should be. I doubt whether in the average case such training is as good a preparation for military service as a corresponding amount of time spent in exercise in a gymnasium or at outdoor sports. On the other hand there are a few of these boy-soldiers who are quite proficient, and I do not know how I should get along with my work at the Institute without these partially instructed members of each class. They are generally the ex-officers of the school organizations. As a rule, however, they do not know the manual of the sword, are incorrect in giving commands, have had little or no practice in the firings or bayonet exercises, and are lacking in military bearing and courtesy.

At the commencement of the current year a theoretical and practical examination was held at the Institute for the selection of officers and non-commissioned officers. The average mark on a scale of twelve of the forty-eight candidates who took the examination was seven and nine tenths. This would not have been a bad showing had it represented the work of the entire class, but it represented that of a select few out of a hundred and twenty-six, who had had on an average two and one-half years' instruction, many of whom had been officers and non-commissioned officers. It may be safely asserted, I think, that the drill which boys get at such schools, although helpful in the case of the Technology battalion, which is formed anew every year, is of no appreciable value to a militia organization, and even injures the militia by satiating boys with military service before they are out of school.

Turning now to the selfish aspect of military training, what should be its scope? There are many parents who wish their sons to have that sense of order, punctuality and obedience, the erect carriage and courteous demeanor which belong to the ideal soldier, but do not care to have them subjected to military discipline. To satisfy this class is impossible. Military instruction can not be successfully carried on as a means of physical training. If it is to be a success, there must be more of the idea of war in the minds of teachers and pupils, for this is the only sanction for the strictness, not to say severity, which is essential. Gymnastics may make men strong, agile, and erect, but it can never give them that steadiness and dignity which are the result of constant exercise under an authority which a gymnasium can never know.

I would recommend that fewer boys be required to take military instruction; that these should be volunteers from the higher classes; and that the school organizations be regularly inspected and reported on by militia officers. Competitive drills, I have found, create an interest and zeal in my classes, and I believe them beneficial to schools and colleges; I think, however, that they should be participated in by the entire command and should be followed by a criticism by the judges, so that the pupils, teachers and public may know the good and bad points of the work on both sides.