



Searching for a Winner: Pressfield's *Gates of Fire*: Sparta's Training Regimen: the 8-Nighter; As the Greeks, Believers Must Learn to Fight in the Dark

18. The objective in the training of a cadet is to prepare him to engage in mortal combat against an enemy whose intent is to kill him and his fellow warriors, seize their land, and jeopardize the lives and freedoms of their families and fellow citizens.
19. Thus, youths who are not so inclined were trained for combat and were granted no quarter. The Spartan's emphasis on military superiority was not driven by a lust for war but a clear and certain understanding that the day would come when the *polis* [πόλις], the city-state, would face the assault of a predator force.
20. So that the city could be successfully defended the youths were trained in the tactics of warfare.
21. I will have to do some editing of Pressfield's *Gates of Fire* but certain excerpts will illustrate from Spartan military training and combat the principle of ascetic self-discipline. His account of the Battle of Thermopylae is given by the sole Greek survivor of this event, a helot slave named Xenones \zen'ō-nēz\, as he testifies before the conquering Persian general Xerxes I and several of his Immortals:

Pressfield, *Gates of Fire*, 66-69:

NOTE: Greek words and terms in context will be defined for clarity from:

Liddell, Henry George and Robert Scott. *A Greek-English Lexicon*. 9th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968).

Attribution will appear in brackets—[]—and noted by the abbreviation, “L&S,” plus page number(s).

This incident took place some six years prior to the battle at Thermopylae. I was fourteen at the time and not yet employed by my master as his battle squire. I was serving as a sparring partner to a Spartiate [Σπαρτιάτης, a Spartan (L&S, 1624).] youth of my own age named Alexandros [Ἀλέξανδρος, \a-lex' an-dras\]. He was the son of the *polemarch*, [πολεμάρχ,] or war leader, Olympieus [Ὀλυμπίευσ, \a-lum-pē'-ous\] and at that time, aged fourteen, the protégé or Dienekes \di-a-nē' kēz\.

The army was at the Oaks, in the Otona valley, a blistering late summer afternoon, on an eight-nighter. These are regimental exercises normally, though in this case it involved a division.

And entire *mora* [μόρα, a division of the Spartan army (L&S, 1146).], or division, more than twelve hundred men with full armor and battle train including an equal number of squires and helots, had marched out into the high valleys and drilled in darkness for four nights, sleeping in the day in open bivouac, by watches, at full readiness with no cover, then drilling day and night for the following three days. Conditions were deliberately contrived to make the exercise as close as possible to the rigor of actual campaign, simulating everything except casualties. There were mock night assaults up twenty-degree slopes, each man bearing full kit and *panoplia* [πανοπλία, suit of armor: shield, helmet, breastplate, greaves, sword, and lance (L&S, 1298).], sixty-five to eighty pounds of shield and armor. Then assaults down the hill. Then more across. The terrain was chosen for its boulder-strewn aspect and the numerous gnarled and low-branched oaks which dotted the slopes. The skill was to flow around everything, like water over rocks, without breaking the line.



Rations were hard linseed loaves, which Dienekes declared fit only for barn insulation, and figs alone, nothing hot. This type of exercise is only partially in anticipation of night action; its primary purpose is training for surefootedness, for orientation by feel within the phalanx [φάλαγξ, line of battle or battle-array (L&S, 1913); infantry drawn up in close order, with shields joined and long spears overlapping (*Oxford English Dictionary*, 2:2150).] and for action without sight, particularly over uneven ground. It is axiomatic among the Lakedaemonians that an army must be able to dress and maneuver the line as skillfully blind as sighted, for in the dust and terror of the *othismos* [ὄθισμός, the thrust and push of shield against shield (L&S, 2031).], the initial battlefield collision and the horrific scrum that ensues, no man can see more than five feet in any direction, nor hear his own cries above the din.

It is a common misconception among the other Hellenes that the character of Lakedaemonian military training is brutal and humorless in the extreme. Nothing could be further from the fact. I have never experienced under other circumstances anything like the relentless hilarity that proceeds during these otherwise grueling field exercises.

Once on an errand I saw Leonidas himself, unable to get to his feet for a minute or more, so doubled over was he from some otherwise untranslatable wisecrack. This, and other like incidents, endeared Leonidas universally to the men.

The purpose of the eight-nighter is to drive the individuals of the division, and the unit itself, beyond the point of humor. It is when the jokes stop that the real lessons are learned and each man, and the *mora* as a whole, make those incremental advances which pay off in the ultimate crucible. The hardship of the exercises is intended less to strengthen the back than to toughen the mind.

The Spartans say that any army may win while it still has its legs under it; the real test comes when all strength is fled and the men must produce victory on will alone.

PRINCIPLES:

1. The training regimen described by Xenones can be used to illustrate the believer's spiritual growth in Bible class.
2. Our participation in the angelic conflict requires that we engage in a training regimen that instructs us in the strategy and tactics of executing the Christian way of life.
3. We assemble as a unit for this training. We all inculcate God's divine directives together for the purpose of developing our spiritual skills
4. Just as the Lakedaemonians were trained as a unit to fight in the dark under maximum pressure, so also we are trained to fight an invisible enemy under the pressures of testing in three categories.
5. Our line of battle is the double column. In its left column we advance in our spiritual growth through inculcation of doctrine.
6. In its right column our motivation for the advance is provided by an ever-growing mental attitude of reciprocity for our Leader, the Lord Jesus Christ.
7. He is not a harsh taskmaster as He assures us in:

Matthew 11:30 - "For My yoke is easy, and My burden is light."



8. What makes the yoke easy and the burden light is the availability of the enabling power of the Holy Spirit and the Word of God circulating the stream of consciousness.
9. Believers who fail in the advance will be treated in grace but that grace is expressed in love which demands that we orient to righteous standards in order to compete in the Invisible War.
10. Our Lord has a great sense of humor and certainly finds us amusing as we struggle through our testings. Nevertheless, He is willing to forgive our sins if we will but confess them to God and get back in the fight.
11. Those who do not become ascetic about the advance fall under divine discipline, designed to influence the believer to orient and adjust to his spiritual condition so he will be prepared to orient and adjust to the exigencies of the devil's world.