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The Abolition of Compulsory Church Parades in the British Army

by JEREMY A. CRANG

The compulsory church parade was one of the oldest traditions in the British army, dating back to the seventeenth century. In 1946, shortly after the end of the Second World War, the practice was abolished. This was a significant moment in Army–Church relations since the compulsory attendance of soldiers at divine worship had been an official acknowledgement of the importance of religion as a guiding force in the corporate life of the army. This article explores the background to this historic decision and the unsuccessful efforts of senior officers in the late 1940s to restore the ritual.

Church Parade

Hered like silly sheep
In our allotted pews,
We listen half asleep,
While Parson airs his views.

In high official flight
We take off from our knees
And bleat about the right
To worship as we please.

Checked on the Big Parade
(Some item out of place),
No point the Parson made
Can lessen our disgrace.

And heaven has, I fear,
No dispensating cup;
For we are only here
To make the numbers up.

William Clarke¹

The compulsory church parade was one of the most enduring customs in the British army. The origins of the ritual can be traced back to regulations issued to the Royalist army during the English civil war:

And that the service of Almighty God be not neglected, it is ordained, that there be a chaplain appointed for every regiment, who shall read prayers orderly, and duly

Parl. Deb. = *Parliamentary debates, Commons*, 5th ser. cdxxi, 1945–6; PRO = Public Record Office; TNA = The National Archives; WO = War Office papers

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¹ *Tribune*, 28 May 1943, 19.

once every day whilst they are in leaguer, and shall preach, or expound some piece of scripture, or catechism once at least on every Sunday, and holy day, in some such convenient place as the colonel of the regiment shall appoint, and by the sound of a trumpet or drum notice shall be given of the time, in such manner as the whole regiment may take notice thereof.²

When the standing army was created after the Restoration, compulsory attendance at divine worship became the first article of the Articles of War: 'All Officers and Soldiers (not having just impediment) shall diligently frequent Divine Service and Sermons, in such places as shall be appointed by the Regiment, Troop or Company wherein they serve.'³ This practice became enshrined in military regulations and for 300 years British troops, wherever they were stationed, were paraded to attend divine worship. It was, as one chaplain-general proudly asserted, 'our oldest unimpaired tradition'.⁴ However, in 1946, shortly after the end of the Second World War, this historic ritual was abolished. This article traces the thinking behind that decision.

Under the system of church attendance that had become established in the army by the late nineteenth century, soldiers were required to participate in divine worship every Sunday morning. But, as J. M. Brereton points out, this was not simply a religious ritual: it was an important military ritual: the ceremonial highlight of the week. Usually a unit would be paraded at 10.00 a.m. in full dress uniform. It would be inspected by the commanding officer and any soldier whose tunic was not immaculately pressed or whose rifle was dirty could expect little sympathy. The troops would then be marched to church. The service would last for at least an hour, depending on the verbosity of the chaplain, before the unit would re-form and march back to barracks. By the time this operation had been completed, half of the soldier's day of rest had passed, and the following day there was the usual group of offenders, whose turnout had not been up to scratch, awaiting punishment outside the orderly room.⁵ It was no surprise that many soldiers greatly resented their Sunday morning worship. Private Frank Richards, who served in the infantry around the turn of the century, observed that 'Ninety-five per cent of the Battalion heartily detested Church Parade and would do anything in reason to get out of it.'⁶ One way to evade the event, as some shrewd recruits realised, was to claim on joining up that they were affiliated to one of the so-called 'fancy religions', such as the Primitive Methodists or the Plymouth Brethren. Since few garrisons, especially overseas, had facilities

² Quoted in M. Griffin, 'The foundation of the Chaplaincy Corps', *Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research* lxxx (2002), 290.

³ Chaplain-general, memorandum on compulsory attendance at divine worship in the army, 13 Mar. 1930, TNA: PRO, WO 32/4014.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ J. M. Brereton, *The British soldier: a social history from 1661 to the present day*, London 1986, 89.

⁶ F. Richards, *Old-soldier sahib*, London 1936, 88.

for such nonconformist worship, and a soldier could not be forced to attend the services of any religious body not his own, some were thus able to gain exemption. But for the vast majority who were nominally Church of England, Roman Catholic or Presbyterian there was no escape.⁷ Field-Marshal Sir William Robertson, who joined up as a private soldier and rose to the very top of the military ladder, wrote that ‘Of all the days of the week, Sunday was the most hated.’⁸

The utility of compulsory church parades was the subject of intermittent discussion in military circles, as well as in parliament and the press, for many years prior to the Second World War.⁹ In 1936 Field-Marshal Sir Philip Chetwode, commander-in-chief India, proposed that in certain circumstances troops should be allowed to proceed independently to church and be ‘marked in’ at the door by an officer or NCO, who would keep a watchful eye on the smartness of their turnout. The Army Council was, however, reluctant to make any concession on this issue. It was argued that at a time of recruiting shortages in Britain church parades were an important means of keeping the army in the public eye and showing off units to their best advantage. It was conceded that officers should look into the possibility of reducing the formalities connected with the inspections which preceded the march to church, but it was confirmed that the existing regulations dealing with the attendance of soldiers at divine service would remain.¹⁰

The instructions governing church parades during the Second World War were set out in paragraph 1605 of King’s Regulations 1940. This stated that ‘all ranks, unless granted special leave or prevented by military duty, will attend divine service’. ‘Soldiers’, it was laid down, ‘will be marched to and from their places of worship.’¹¹ This was consolidated in 1941 by a public pronouncement from the Army Council which affirmed ‘their profound conviction of the value of religious inspiration as a source of spiritual and moral strength in the present conflict’.¹² God, it seems, was to be mobilised to bolster the morale of the troops; and they would march to meet Him with their brasses gleaming.

But as the war went on the future of compulsory church parades came under the military microscope. For a start, it was difficult under active service conditions, with intensive training and other commitments, to organise regular attendance at church in line with regulations. Moreover, many of

⁷ Brereton, *British soldier*, 89–91.

⁸ W. Robertson, *From private to field-marshal*, London 1921, 8.

⁹ ‘The chaplain-general and the church parade’, *Royal Army Chaplains’ Department Journal* iii (1924), 420; AG3, compulsory church parade, 17 Mar. 1930; DPS, note on compulsory church parade, 18 Mar. 1930, WO 32/4014.

¹⁰ AG, church parades, 1 June 1943, WO 32/14687; app. A, *ibid.*

¹¹ *The king’s regulations for the Army and the Royal Army Reserve 1940*, London 1940, 510.

¹² P. M. Brumwell, *The army chaplain*, London 1943, 42.

the wartime soldiers, the vast majority of whom were conscripts, had little interest in organised religion and, like generations of soldiers before them, were irritated by the elaborate 'spit and polish' that accompanied the church services.¹³ What was more, some of the army chaplains did little to endear themselves to their Khaki congregations. Too often they seemed disconnected from the realities of life in the ranks. One soldier reported that the padre 'preached his sermons in a very monotonous drone which regularly sent large numbers off to sleep in parade services. Sermons were largely on theoretical theology or else the condemnation of almost every form of recreation, and in particular "sex and alcohol"'.¹⁴

In 1942 the adjutant-general, the remarkably unblimpish General Sir Ronald Adam, set up a morale committee in the War Office to monitor the mood of the troops, the majority of whom at this time were based in Britain and taking little active part in the war effort.¹⁵ As part of its activities, the committee was eager to obtain the views of ordinary soldiers on life in the army. To this end, the War Office received an essay on 'Army morale and efficiency' written by 'a private in the Black Watch' in December 1942. This paper painted a worrying picture of disillusionment in the ranks. Among the causes of dissatisfaction highlighted were compulsory church parades. Not only was it argued that this ritual was simply a show of regimental 'window-dressing' that had more to do with military training than the prelude to worship, but also that it undermined the role of the Church in the army: 'the forbidding display of compulsion and regimentation inherent in many church parades appears to be entirely wrong in relation to the fundamentals of true religion'.¹⁶ Another soldier, a lance corporal in a young soldiers' battalion, was asked to comment on the Black Watch essay. Although more upbeat about the mood of the troops, in his report of February 1943 he agreed that compulsory church parades were a source of discontent: 'What I do object to is the wrong emphasis almost always laid by the military authorities on the parade, the result of which is *disastrous* for the church. For church parade, the Army substitutes church *parade*'.¹⁷

During the spring of 1943 the morale committee considered these issues and with the support of the chaplain-general, the Revd Charles Symons,

¹³ AG, church parades, 1 June 1943, WO 32/14687, app. B; Captain X [W. G. C. Shebbeare], *A soldier looks ahead*, London 1944, 85–6; A. Wilkinson, *Dissent or conform? War, peace and the English Churches, 1900–1945*, London 1986, 294.

¹⁴ Chaplain to the forces, June 1943, Tom Harrison Mass Observation Archive, University of Sussex, file report 1870A, 18; S. H. Loudon, *Chaplain in conflict: the role of army chaplains since 1914*, London 1996, 81.

¹⁵ J. A. Crang, 'The British soldier on the home front: army morale reports, 1940–1945', in P. Addison and A. Calder (eds), *Time to kill: the soldier's experience of war in the west, 1939–1945*, London 1997, 61.

¹⁶ Joint secretaries, essay on morale in the army by a private in the Black Watch, 1 Mar. 1943, WO 163/161, app. A.

¹⁷ App. B, *ibid.*

Adam submitted proposals to the executive committee of the Army Council in June. It was argued that in view of the conditions of service in wartime some modifications should be made to the existing regulations concerning compulsory church parades. Thus, whilst it was conceded that compulsory attendance at church should continue, and that commanding officers should still be permitted to order a formal parade when special circumstances made one desirable, it was recommended that a 'marking in' system should be adopted with soldiers making their own way to church and answering their names to officers and NCOs at the entrance.¹⁸

In discussion of these proposals, it was reported that the 'marking in' system was, in fact, already being practised in a number of units and there was evidence from soldiers' letters and other sources that this had had 'a favourable effect upon the frame of mind in which troops approached church services'. In contrast, where the formal church parades continued 'troops reached the church door in a mood far from devotional'. Although there was some concern that King's Regulations paragraph 1605 was very definite in its assertion that 'soldiers will be marched to and from their place of worship', it was nevertheless contended that in the preamble to the regulations officers were enjoined to 'interpret them reasonably and intelligently', and the 'marking in' system could be regarded as a 'reasonable interpretation'. The ECAC thus agreed to the new policy and it was endorsed by the full Army Council.¹⁹

In July 1943 Adam wrote to senior officers:

The question of modifying existing regulations regarding Church parades has recently been under considerable discussion by the Army Council.

It is not proposed to alter the provisions of KR 1605, but there is a general feeling that in view of the strenuous work troops are now undergoing there is sometimes an inclination to keep men too long on parade prior to Church and that formal parades every Sunday are likely to do more harm than good to the men's spiritual welfare.

A system of 'marking-in', that is to say allowing men detailed to proceed independently, answering their names near the entrance to the Church to officers and NCOs, has been found effective in some units and the Army Council are anxious that Commands should extend this system.

This suggestion would not prevent Commanding Officers from holding formal Church parades on special occasions or even at stated intervals – say – once a month.

In such cases, the preliminary parade should be kept to a minimum and just be sufficient to see that men are cleanly and properly dressed, and ceremonial should be avoided except when special circumstances make it clearly desirable.²⁰

¹⁸ AG, church parades, 1 June 1943, WO 32/14687; app. B, *ibid*.

¹⁹ Minutes of 113th meeting of executive committee of Army Council, 4 June 1943; minutes of 32nd meeting of Army Council, 18 June 1943, WO 32/14687.

²⁰ R. F. Adam to GOsC-in-C, Home Commands, GOsC-in-C, London District and Northern Ireland, 31 July 1943, *ibid*.

At the end of the war the question of compulsory church parades was revisited by the military authorities. Objections to soldiers being forced to attend church were raised in parliament on a number of occasions and it was thought likely that the matter would be brought up again during the debate on the Army and Air Force (Annual) Bill in 1946. Jack Lawson, the Labour secretary of state for war and a staunch Methodist, concluded that 'it may not be desirable to hold the present practice much longer' and he wished to explore the possibility of revoking King's Regulations paragraph 1605.²¹ To this end, the views of the Churches were to be ascertained through the Interdenominational Advisory Committee on Army Chaplaincy Services, the archbishop of Canterbury, Geoffrey Fisher, was to be consulted, and Adam was asked to draw up a War Office position paper.²² The Interdenominational Advisory Committee met in February 1946 and, with the exception of the Revd Joseph Firth, the Methodist member, was unanimous in its support for the continuation of the existing system.²³ The views of the committee were endorsed by Fisher who stated that any change in policy would be 'disastrous' for the army.²⁴ In March Adam submitted his paper to the executive committee of the Army Council. This summarised the views on both sides of the argument:

The arguments in favour of compulsory church parades are as follows:

- (a) There is a long tradition of corporate worship in the Forces, and it would be a grave action on the part of an avowed Christian community to break that tradition, particularly at the end of a long and successful war fought in defence of Christian principles.
- (b) Much of the Army is overseas and the effect of such a decision on overseas communities, particularly in Eastern countries, would be considerable and harmful to the Army and the country.
- (c) The Army is a corporate body and there could be no corporate expression of its attitudes except by order. In the Army, all essential activities are necessarily made matters of organised duty and are not left to chance or inclination. Compulsion in such matters is not viewed as interference with liberty to the same extent as in civil life. Voluntary attendance of individuals, at service, or attendance during the 'padre's hour', is no substitute for corporate worship.
- (d) Men enter the Army in peace-time at an age when they are naturally diffident about religion, and are keenly susceptible to the opinions of others. The compulsory attendance helps them over this period without forcing them to be too obtrusive

²¹ E. B. B. Speed to Sir Henry V. Markham, 10 Jan. 1946, WO 32/14688; J. Lawson, *A man's life*, London 1951, 72.

²² Minutes of 246th meeting of executive committee of Army Council, 11 Jan. 1946, WO 32/14688.

²³ Minutes of 78th meeting of interdenominational advisory committee on army chaplaincy services, 7 Feb. 1946, *ibid*.

²⁴ Geoffrey Fisher to J. J. Lawson, 4 Mar. 1946, *ibid*.

in their religion. Parents of potential recruits from religious homes would be antagonised by the discontinuance of official religious observance.

(e) Young soldiers could not be left entirely to follow their own inclination off duty. General training towards a right way of living is essential.

(f) The abolition of a compulsory parade, unless carefully applied, might, in a community such as the Army, result in the virtual removal of opportunity to attend voluntarily. In a corporate community, true freedom of worship is best safeguarded by corporate compulsion.

The arguments against compulsory church parades are summarised below:

(a) They are, and for years have been, thoroughly unpopular with the soldier. This is no passing phase. The feeling was present in peace and was very evident just after the 1914–1918 war.

(b) Religion cannot be inculcated by compulsion. The soldier feels that compulsion, to which the civilian is not subject, is being applied in a matter of conscience and that his personal liberty is infringed. Many men willingly volunteer to do fatigues in order to escape church parade.

(c) On what the soldier considers should be his day of rest, time is occupied in preparation for parade and in actually parading. This is irksome, and the frame of mind of the soldier on his arrival at the church is such that he derives little or no benefit from the service.

(d) Other Armies get on quite well without church parades and without detriment to morale. In the British Army, it is only the European troops who are compelled to attend church. Indians, Africans, etc., are not compelled to do so.

(e) The recruiting value of church parades is negligible. In peace, troops are either largely segregated from the civilian population in military stations such as Aldershot and Salisbury Plain, or serve abroad. In neither case are recruits attracted by church parades. If, and when, voluntary recruiting is again resorted to, or if for other reasons it is desirable to keep the Army in the public eye, the better way will be by marches of formed bodies, under arms, with bands and colours through centres of population at times when the civil population is most in evidence.

(f) It is the business of the chaplains to encourage and persuade soldiers to attend divine service. They have ample opportunity to do so, more so than any parish priest, at the 'padre's hour' which is held weekly, or at least fortnightly, in all units and at which attendance is compulsory. At the 'padre's hour', the soldier has ample opportunity to judge the chaplain and to decide whether he is likely to derive benefit from his services.

Church door checking:

A system is at present in operation of detailing men to attend church, but the men, instead of attending parade, report to a non-commissioned officer at or near the church door. This system, though more popular than compulsory church parades, savours of distrust and is undignified.²⁵

²⁵ AG, compulsory church attendance in the army, 6 Mar. 1946, WO 163/99.

The executive committee was split on how to proceed. Some of the members were in favour of retention, arguing that religion could have beneficial effects on young soldiers, and that compulsion assisted those who were diffident about their faith. Others, however, were of the opinion that religion could not be taught by compulsion, that men in the services were not children, were reasonably educated and should have made up their minds about their beliefs before they joined up. The matter was referred to the full Army Council.²⁶

At the Army Council meeting which considered the matter, the secretary of state, Jack Lawson, opened the discussion by stating that the question of compulsory church attendance was of great interest to ex-service Members of Parliament, and there was strong support for abolition on the government benches.²⁷ The chaplain-general, Canon Frederick Hughes, was then invited to give his opinion. Hughes, an ebullient former chaplain with 8th Army and 21st Army Group who believed that the objections were 'an emotional and passing phase', put up a stout defence of the existing regulations.²⁸ He regarded the present system as a sign that 'the nation had made up its mind where it stood' and that ceremonies such as the coronation, and prayers in parliament and the law courts, had a similar significance. It also indicated that the army had decided that the resources of God were 'corporately and individually necessary' and that religious beliefs influenced the character and conduct of soldiers. Furthermore, the system nursed the soldier through the 'recruit stage' of religious life and ensured that opportunities for worship did not depend on the 'personal charm' of the chaplain. He concluded that if the Army Council decided on abolition 'it would be a sign that the Army was no longer to be trusted as a corporate body of God-fearing soldiers'.²⁹

In response, Lawson wondered whether abolition would, in fact, harm religion in the army. The nonconformist Churches, the Salvation Army and other bodies, he argued, had a healthy spiritual life without resorting to compulsion. Moreover, as a lay preacher, his experience of compulsory attendance at church was 'very discouraging'. He stressed that it was in the interests of religion that he wished to change the present system. The chief of the imperial general staff, Field-Marshal Lord Alanbrooke, agreed on the importance of religion in military life, but was firmly of the opinion that this was better served by voluntary attendance than by compelling men to attend: 'They should be drawn not driven.' He also did not believe it was good for the chaplains to be sure of their congregations. General Adam strongly

²⁶ Minutes of 255th meeting of executive committee of Army Council, 8 Mar. 1946, WO 32/14688.

²⁷ Minutes of 63rd meeting of Army Council, 15 Mar. 1946, *ibid.*

²⁸ Chaplain-general to DAG(A), 5 Feb. 1946, *ibid.*; J. Smyth, *In this sign conquer*, London 1968, 232, 310.

²⁹ Minutes of 63rd meeting of Army Council, 15 Mar. 1946, WO 32/14688.

supported these views. Compulsion was alien to the spirit of religion and everyone tried to get out of attending church parades. 'A good chaplain', he added, 'could always draw a full attendance.'³⁰

Canon Hughes sought to counter these arguments. The common good, he suggested, was the justification for compulsion in this as in other military affairs. Soldiers were marched to church because 'the worship of God involved the Army's well-being' and if compulsion was withdrawn soldiers would conclude that the army was 'indifferent to religion'. Furthermore, the nature of army life meant that any activity for which arrangements were not definitely 'laid on' was almost certain to be poorly attended because there were so many other things to do. Indeed, if the voluntary principle was extended to other army activities the officers responsible for them would also have good reason to complain. No matter how competent the Royal Army Chaplains' Department was, he claimed, it was unlikely that every chaplain would be capable of ensuring a good attendance at church. Having said his piece, Hughes withdrew from the meeting.³¹

The deputy chief of the imperial general staff, Lieutenant-General Sir Sidney Kirkman, entered the fray. He was in favour of the current practice, particularly as a support for the diffident young soldier who might wish to go to church but was likely to be put off by hostile 'public opinion'. The vice chief of the imperial general staff, Lieutenant-General Frank Simpson, strongly endorsed this. In his view church parades should be compulsory since they ensured 'the small extra persuasion' that might make the difference. The quarter-master-general, General Sir Daril Watson, then spoke up. He cast his mind back to his time in the ranks and recalled that he had resented being compelled to attend. The finance member, the Labour MP Frederick Bellenger, agreed. His experience as a soldier had left him firmly against compulsion. He did not believe that the diffident young soldier would be deterred from attending church and he considered that 'religious observance should not be dictated by the State'. Rounding up, Jack Lawson noted that he had given 'much anxious thought' to the religious well-being of the young men entering the army and was of the opinion that 'compulsion was a hindrance, not a help'. He sensed that the majority of the committee inclined towards his views. He would thus recommend to the prime minister that compulsory church attendance in the army should be abolished; a decision subsequently endorsed by Clement Attlee.³²

At the end of March the issue was duly raised in the House of Commons during the debate on the Army and Air Force (Annual) Bill. Tom Driberg, the Labour MP for Maldon and a devout Anglo-Catholic, was the prime mover. He stated that nearly 200 MPs of various parties had signed up to a

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid; E. B. B. Speed to Sir Alan Lascelles, 25 Mar. 1946, *ibid.*

new clause abolishing compulsory church parades. There was, he argued, an important principle at stake: 'in a democratic society, an adult citizen should be free to worship or not to worship as and when he chooses'. This applied as much to a serviceman as a civilian for despite being subject to military discipline he did not surrender his soul: 'no sergeant-major can drill that inner part of him'. Driberg, moreover, wished to liberate the chaplains as well as their congregations: 'any chaplain worthy of his calling would far sooner preach to 20, 30 or 50 men who wanted to go, and have gone voluntarily, than to an enormous church full of 500 or 1,000 men who have been conscripted there'. Indeed, by associating attendance at church with tiresome 'spit and polish' there was a danger of 'conditioning the men against religion, possibly for the rest of their lives'.³³

Many of those who spoke in the debate supported these views. Among them, John Freeman, the Labour MP for Watford who regarded himself as 'a non-believing Christian',³⁴ suggested that there was a mystical belief that because Britain was a Christian state, the Church of England was the state Church, and the army was the servant of the state, so the army should undertake a compulsory corporate act of worship: 'Somehow this is said to be symbolic of the connection between God and the State.' This, he observed, just did not stand up to scrutiny. If the argument was pushed to its logical conclusion, the cabinet, the civil service, the National Coal Board and others should also be forced to attend church on Sundays because they too represented the state and must be corporately linked to the Church. He pictured the happy scene of Winston Churchill, the leader of the opposition and a salaried pillar of the constitution, walking arm-in-arm to church with Nye Bevan, the fiery socialist minister of health.³⁵ James Callaghan, the Labour MP for Cardiff South who was brought up as a strict Baptist, also contributed to the debate. Pursuing a similar line, he argued that since only twenty-seven MPs had attended prayers in the House of Commons that morning, the members could hardly compel the army to fulfil a similar obligation: 'If we take the liberty of deciding whether we shall or shall not worship God in this way, surely the men should have the same right.'³⁶ Clearly, the continuation of church parades was anathema to a range of opinion across the theological spectrum.

Lawson was able to head off the calls for reform from the Commons. He stated that since a large number of young men were now conscripted into the army, anyone holding his office was bound to consider such issues. Although for 'technical reasons' it was not possible to accept the new clause, he announced that in due course steps would be taken to 'cancel or modify' those paragraphs of King's Regulations which dealt with compulsory church

³³ *Parl. Deb.*, cols 705–8; T. Driberg, *Ruling passions*, London 1978, 45, 73, 193.

³⁴ John Freeman to author, 29 Sept. 2003.

³⁵ *Parl. Deb.*, cols 726–7.

³⁶ *Ibid.* col. 721; J. Callaghan, *Time and chance*, London 1987, 22.

attendance. 'It is my belief', he contended, 'that the religious life of the Army will be strengthened and made more real.' As a result of this announcement, Driberg agreed to withdraw the proposed clause.³⁷

Outside parliament, however, there continued to be misgivings in influential circles. Fisher still believed that the principle of church parades ought to be preserved and when he read of Lawson's announcement in the House of Commons he wrote to the secretary of state that he was 'a little sorry that you used the word "cancel" and did not confine yourself to say that the Regulations would be reviewed and modified'.³⁸ A menacing letter also arrived on the desk of the permanent secretary at the War Office, Sir Eric Speed, from the redoubtable Field-Marshal Viscount Montgomery of Alamein, soon to take up the post of chief of the imperial general staff. The son of an Anglican bishop and a close associate of Canon Hughes, whom he had appointed to 8th Army and 21st Army Group, the field-marshal thundered that he was 'opposed 100% to the suggested proposals, in so far as they are known to me. The new order will affect adversely the morale of the Army in peace and in war ... The political chiefs are skating on very dangerous ground'.³⁹ A short reply was despatched to Montgomery stating that the government had decided to end the present system and that Adam was drawing up new regulations.⁴⁰

In July the fresh guidelines were submitted to the Army Council. In short, while it was proposed that boy soldiers under the age of seventeen-and-a-half should be required to attend divine worship or a parade associated with it, and that on ceremonial occasions of local or national importance which included a religious service general officers commanding-in-chief should be permitted to order a parade of troops to take part, in all other circumstances compulsory church parades should be abolished. However, every facility was to be made available for voluntary worship and no counter-attractions, such as games or other recreations, were to be organised during these hours.⁴¹ The Army Council, including Montgomery who had presumably now realised that the battle was lost, agreed to these proposals.⁴² In October King's Regulations paragraph 1605 was amended to read that 'officers and soldiers will not be ordered to attend a religious service or to parade before a service or on returning from it'.⁴³ So ended 300 years of army tradition.

³⁷ *Parl. Deb.*, cols 730–3, 735.

³⁸ Fisher to Lawson, 22 Mar., 16 Apr. 1946, WO 32/14688.

³⁹ Montgomery of Alamein to Speed, 6 June 1946, *ibid*; B. L. Montgomery, *The memoirs of Field-Marshal the Viscount Montgomery of Alamein*, London 1958, 18, 114, 204.

⁴⁰ Speed to Montgomery, 11 June 1946, WO 32/14688.

⁴¹ Joint secretaries, note on church parades: amendments to regulations etc., 1 July 1946, *ibid*.

⁴² Minutes of 66th meeting of Army Council, 5 July 1946, *ibid*.

⁴³ King's Regulations 1940, amendment no. 52, Oct. 1946, *ibid*.

But three years later a counter-attack was launched. In a paper to the Army Council in November 1949 the adjutant-general at the time, General Sir James Steele, called for the new policy to be reviewed:

During my tours in recent months I have been made constantly aware of a growing weight of opinion among commanders and commanding officers which is wholly in favour of a return to compulsory church attendance, accompanied by the reintroduction of some form of compulsory church parade, not on every Sunday but at fixed and fairly frequent intervals. This opinion, which I myself share, is the result partly of respect for a not unworthy tradition of ordered and corporate worship and partly of a growing conviction that the young soldier of to-day needs, more strongly than ever before, some form of moral sheet-anchor which will assist him to resist temptation and which recognition of the authority of God can best provide; it is unfortunately true that many young men join the Army practically untouched by the churches and knowing little of those things which inspire patriotism, give a sure moral foundation and create morale. Encouraged religious instruction will do much to train these young soldiers towards a right way of thinking and to foster in them an outlook upon which soldierly self-respect can properly be based, but alone it is not enough. Corporate worship, with its background of tradition is also needed. To make such worship compulsory would be to safeguard freedom of worship for those who desire it by relieving them from the appearance of being peculiar in that desire, to lay others open to the effect of precept and example, and to safeguard the real but weak desires of many men which alone would not bring them to voluntary worship. Commanders also are not unaware that the conditions attending church parade at its best are propitious to the creation of a favourable impression of the soldier and of the Army, and are therefore likely to stimulate rather than prejudice recruiting.

I consider that the time has now come to reverse a policy which was introduced because, at that time, it was felt that it would be in accord with the general feelings of the public, as expressed in Parliament and in the Press. That those feelings have now changed with the passage of time is, I consider, shown by the growing public concern about the lowered moral standards throughout the country and the rising rate of juvenile and other delinquency, and by an increasing determination to raise the general moral tone. A reversal of the Army's policy in this matter, demonstrating clearly our determination to set our house in order and to safeguard the youth of the nation during such time as it is in our hands, would, I am certain, be generally welcome.⁴⁴

In discussion, Steele reiterated the main points of his paper and proposed that compulsory church parades should be re-introduced on a 'modified scale'. The chief of the imperial staff, Field-Marshal Sir William Slim, agreed with the adjutant-general. It was disappointing, he noted, that many young men had never been to church and it would be 'a good thing' to restore corporate worship. The vice-chief of the imperial general staff, Lieutenant-General Sir Gerald Templar, and the quarter-master-general, General Sir

⁴⁴ AG, compulsory church attendance and church parades, 11 Nov. 1949, *ibid.*

Sidney Kirkman, supported these views. In contrast, the under-secretary of state, Labour MP Michael Stewart, was opposed to any turning back of the clock. He believed that compulsion in this matter was inappropriate for young men, that it would not improve behaviour and that it would merely 'excite hostility towards the Army and national service'. The permanent secretary, Sir George Turner, was also doubtful. He stated that it would have been much easier to have 'held the position' in 1946 than at the present time. Public opinion was now against compulsion and this was 'a very important factor' when national service was in operation. The Labour secretary of state for war, Emanuel Shinwell, declared that he wished to be as 'neutral' as possible but that 'the predominant factor would be the political issue'. On the basis of recent conversations he had had, it was clear that opposition would 'not be confined to one side of the House'. Although he could not support the proposals 'in principle or from a political point of view', he recognised that a majority on the Army Council were in favour and he authorised Steele to prepare a submission for the Standing Committee of Service Ministers.⁴⁵

In the meantime, Shinwell asked Stewart to amplify his views and in January 1950 the under-secretary, who had a nonconformist background, wrote a private minute to the secretary of state:

My opposition to compulsory church attendance is based on the following considerations:

1. Compulsion breeds a distaste for religious observance and is abhorrent to many religious people. Religious faith, voluntarily embraced, can be a solid foundation for right conduct; compulsion may well prevent the forming of any real convictions.
2. Adult and juvenile delinquency has been the subject of much study in recent years. Nothing has emerged to suggest that compulsory church attendance is a cure for delinquency.
3. No evidence has been adduced of any decline in Army discipline or efficiency since the new regulations were introduced in 1946.
4. If we are to attract and hold good quality recruits we should try to create in the Army a life where there is strict discipline in matters affecting military efficiency and the greatest individual freedom compatible with such discipline.
5. A change in policy now would be strongly attacked by Parliament and public – and some of the most devout people would lead the attack. I cannot see why we should expose ourselves to this in order to gain something, the value of which is illusory.⁴⁶

Shinwell also agreed that the Interdenominational Advisory Committee should be consulted. At a meeting of that committee in February, Chaplain-General Hughes explained that commanders were of the opinion that the

⁴⁵ Minutes of 91st meeting of Army Council, 18 Nov. 1949, *ibid*.

⁴⁶ US of S to S of S, 30 Jan. 1950, *ibid*; M. Stewart, *Life and labour: an autobiography*, London 1980, 13, 18.

change in policy had undermined the corporate life of the army, and that the regulations might be amended so as to restore compulsory church parades on a regular basis. The Revd Dr John MacLagan, the Church of Scotland representative, disliked the term 'compulsory', but stated that the Scottish regiments were strongly in favour of church parades: one wished to establish a Kirk Session from among its members. The English Presbyterian, the Revd H. Burns Jamieson, agreed that the word 'compulsory' was problematic, but he supported a return to the position before 1946, although it was important to avoid any element of 'spit and polish'. The Revd Osborn Wiles, the Baptist, declared that he too would be 'very glad' to see a return to the previous situation. Unsurprisingly, the Methodist, the Revd Joseph Firth, who had been the only member in favour of abolition three years earlier, disagreed. He observed that 'religion was best served voluntarily' and was sorry that the initiative to do away with church parades had not come from the Churches themselves. The Revd Hugh Dowd, the Roman Catholic, was also hesitant. He was opposed to any sudden reintroduction 'unless the troops were educated to appreciate the ceremonial parade as a public profession of their faith as Christian soldiers'. As for the Church of England, Archbishop Fisher, who had reluctantly acquiesced in the policy change, had asked to be consulted before any view was expressed. It was believed that he wished to see a return to church parades 'in some form'. Overall, it was thought that a majority of the committee were in favour of a reversal of policy.⁴⁷

In March Sir George Turner wrote to Fisher to ascertain his views on the matter.⁴⁸ The archbishop replied that he was indeed strongly in favour of the reintroduction of regular church parades, and that this would have the general support of the Church of England. At the same time, however, he was clearly conscious of the political delicacies involved, especially since Labour's majority in the House of Commons had been reduced to a mere handful of MPs after the general election in February:

those whom I have consulted agree with me that it is not appropriate or desirable to have the issue involved raised at the present time ... there would certainly be some controversy; not a few of the Government's own supporters would strongly object to anything that looked like a reversal of policy in this matter, and the present parliamentary situation is obviously unfavourable for the handling of what might be a cause of division amongst Government supporters.⁴⁹

He therefore concluded that 'I should regret the raising of the matter at the present time.'⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Minutes of 81st meeting of interdenominational advisory committee on army chaplaincy services, 14 Feb. 1950; minutes of 92nd meeting of Army Council, 18 May 1950, WO 32/14688.

⁴⁸ G. Turner to Fisher, 21 Mar. 1950, *ibid.*

⁴⁹ Fisher to Turner, 22 Apr. 1950, *ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

This in effect killed the issue. At a meeting of the Army Council in May, it was agreed that in the light of Fisher's views no further action should be taken on the subject.⁵¹ The archbishop had ridden to the defence of the politicians and the generals had been defeated. In 1955 the new Queen's Regulations confirmed the changes made a decade earlier.⁵²

At one level the abolition of compulsory church parades was a sign of the modernising influences that the Second World War had unleashed on the army as a social institution. The demands of war had forced the War Office to re-examine various aspects of army life in an effort to improve the morale and efficiency of the mainly conscript soldiers who filled the ranks. Under General Adam, the wartime adjutant-general, reforms had been made in such fields as personnel selection, officer-man relations, welfare and education.⁵³ The demise of compulsory church parades – a process begun during the war and completed in its immediate aftermath – was part of this attempt at modernisation. But at another level it was a significant moment in Army-Church relations. The compulsory attendance of soldiers at divine worship had been an official acknowledgment of the importance of religion as a guiding force in the corporate life of the army, and one of the central rocks upon which the army chaplains' department rested. Now, at a time when the state compelled its young men to serve in the armed forces, the military authorities no longer felt able to enforce this historic ritual. The evidence suggests that the chief reason for abolition was not, as might be expected, a secular drift in society, but a belief that religion could be made more real if voluntary. As Jack Lawson stressed, it was in order to promote religion that he wished to end the practice. To the defenders of the *status quo* this could only be interpreted as a severe blow to the influence of the Church in the army. But it was notable that in the early 1950s the view was put forward in official circles that there was 'a better spirit of true worship in the Army nowadays than was ever engendered by compulsory Church parades'.⁵⁴

⁵¹ Minutes of 92nd meeting of Army Council, 18 May 1950, *ibid.*

⁵² *The queen's regulations for the army*, London 1955, 329.

⁵³ J. A. Crang, *The British army and the people's war, 1939-1945*, Manchester 2000, 139-40.

⁵⁴ AUS note, 10 July 1951, WO 32/14688.