

Searching for a Winner: Training Cadets to Function as a Unit: Polynikes Chastises Alexandros; The Greek Phalanx: Clashing Shields in Dust & Blood

12. When the intense battles of the Invisible War are afoot, it is the believer who has developed the mental attitude of the winner who will be able to fight the good fight against an unseen foe. He will prevail because of his spiritual skills developed within the system.
13. When believers in a local church develop their skills together they form a phalanx that functions in the Invisible War as line of battle called the Body of Christ.
14. Positive believers, filled with the Holy Spirit, functioning under their spiritual gifts, and motivated by reciprocity have a collective historical impact that is as invisible as the battles they fight but as effective as the well-trained Spartan phalanx on the Greek battlefield.

Pressfield, *Gates of Fire*, 70:

Alexandros' training platoon was already awake and in formation with eight others of the fourth age-class, boys thirteen and fourteen under their twenty-year-old drill instructors, on the lower slopes below the army's camp.

I turned and saw Alexandros singled out at the edge of his platoon, with Polynikes [Πολυνίκης \pal-ū-ni' kās\, the Knight and Olympic champion, standing before him, raging. Alexandros [Ἀλέξανδρος, 'a-lex' an-dras\] was fourteen, Polynikes twenty-three; even at a range of a hundred yards you could see the boy was terrified.

The warrior Polynikes was no man to be trifled with. He was a nephew of Leonidas, with a prize of valor already to his name, and utterly pitiless. Apparently he had come down from the upper camp on some errand, had passed the boys of the *agoge* in their lineup and spotted some breach of discipline.

Alexandros had neglected his shield, or to use the Doric term, *etimasen*, "defamed" it. Somehow he had allowed it to lie outside his grasp, facedown, untended on the ground with its big concave bowl pointing at the sky.

Hanson, Victor Davis. *The Wars of the Ancient Greeks*. (London: Cassell, 1999), 58-59:

The extraordinary double-gripped, concave 3-foot shield was singular; there were no circular shields of comparable size and design anywhere before or after in the Mediterranean. The shield's hand grip and arm support distributed the 16-20-pound weight along the whole arm rather than on just the hand. And the convexity of the shield allowed the hoplite's shoulder to be tucked under the upper shield rim. Aristophanes joked that the shield was better used as a well-cover.

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

Polynikes stood in front of Alexandros. "What is this I see in the dirt before me?" he roared. The Spartiates uphill could hear every syllable. "It must be a chamber pot, with its bowl peeking up so daintily."

Is it a chamber pot? He demanded of Alexandros. The boy answered no.

Then what is it?

It is a shield, lord.

Polynikes declared this impossible.

"It can't be a shield, I'm certain of that." His voice carried powerfully up the amphitheater of the valley. "Because not even the dumbest *paidarion* [*παιδάριον*, little boy (L&S, 1286).] would leave a shield lying facedown where he couldn't snatch it up in an instant when the enemy came upon him." He towered over the mortified boy.

"It is a chamber pot," Polynikes declared. "Fill it."

The torture began.

Alexandros was ordered to "fill" his shield. It was a training shield, yes. But Dienekes knew as he looked down with the other Peers from the slope above that this particular *aspis*, patched and repatched over decades, had belonged to Alexandros' father and grandfather before him.

Alexandros was so scared and dehydrated, he couldn't raise a drop.

Polynikes ordered the other boys to take up Alexandros' slack. While their pathetic dribbles splotted onto the wood and leather-padded frame ... Polynikes returned his attention to Alexandros, querying him on the protocol of the shield, which the boy knew and had known since three.

The shield must stand upright at all times, Alexandros declaimed at the top of his voice, with its forearm sleeve and handgrip at the ready. If a warrior stand at the rest, his shield must lean against his knees. If he sit or lie, it must be supported upright by the *tripous basis* [*τρίπους βάσις*, tripod base (L&S, 1821-22, 310).], a light three-legged stand which all bore inside the bowl of the concave *hoplon*, in a carrying nest made for that purpose.

I glanced at Dienekes. His features betrayed no emotion, though I knew he loved Alexandros and wished for nothing more than to dash down the slope and murder Polynikes.

But Polynikes was right. Alexandros was wrong. The boy must be taught a lesson.

Polynikes now had Alexandros' *tripous basis* in his hand. The little tripod was comprised of three dowels joined at one end by a leather thong. The dowels were the thickness of a man's finger and about eighteen inches long. "Line of battle!" Polynikes bellowed. The platoon of boys formed up. He had them all lay their shields, defamed, facedown in the dirt, exactly as Alexandros had done.

By now twelve hundred Spartiates up the hill were observing the spectacle, along with an equal number of squires and helot attendants.

"Shields, port!"

The boys lunged for their heavy, grounded *hopla*. As they did, Polynikes lashed at Alexandros' face with the tripod. Blood sprung. He swatted the next boy and the next until the fifth at last wrestled his twenty-pound, unwieldy shield off the ground and up into place to defend himself.

He made them do it again and again and again.

Starting at one end of the line, then the other, then the middle. Polynikes, as I have said, was one of the Three Hundred Knights and an Olympic victor besides. He could do anything he liked. The drill instructor had been brushed aside, and could do nothing but look on in mortification.

"This is hilarious, isn't it?" Polynikes demanded of the boys. "I'm beside myself, aren't you? I can hardly wait to see combat, which will be even more fun."

The youths knew what was coming next.

When Polynikes tired of torturing them here, he would have their drill instructor march them over to the edge of the plain, to some particularly stout oak, and order them, in formation, to push the tree down with their shields, just the way they would assault an enemy in battle.

The boys would take station in ranks, eight deep, the shield of each pressed into the hollow of the boy's back before him, with the leading boy's shield mashed by their combined weight and pressure against the oak. Then they would do *othismos* [ὀθισμός, the thrust and push of shield against shield (L&S, 2031).] drill.

They would push.

They would strain.

They would attack that tree for all they were worth.

The soles of their bare feet would churn the dirt, heaving and straining until a rut had been excavated ankle-deep, while they crushed each other's guts humping and hurling, grinding into that unmoveable trunk. When the front-rank boy could stand no more he would assume the position of the rearmost and the second boy would move up.

That tree is the enemy!

Attack the enemy!

On it would go, into all-night shield drill which by mid second watch would have reduced the boys to involuntary regurgitation, their bodies shattered utterly from exhaustion, and then, when the dawn sacrifices at last brought clemency and reprieve, the boys would fall in for another full day of training without a minute's sleep.

By this point every nose in the formation had been broken. Each boy's face was a sheet of blood. Polynikes was just taking a breath when Alexandros thoughtlessly reached with a hand to the side of his blood-begrimed face.

"What do you think you're doing?" Polynikes turned instantly upon him.

"Wiping the blood, lord."

"What are you doing that for?"

"So I can see, lord."

"Who told you you had a right to see?"

Polynikes continued his blistering mockery. Why did Alexandros think the division was out here, training at night? Was it not to learn to fight when they couldn't see? Did Alexandros think that in combat he could be allowed to pause to wipe his face? That must be it. Alexandros would call out to the enemy and they would halt politely for the moment so the boy could wipe his face.

"I ask you again, is this a chamber pot?"

"No, lord. It is my shield."

Again Polynikes' dowels blasted the boy across the face. "My'?" he demanded furiously. "My'?"

Dienekes looked on, mortified, from where he stood at the edge of the upper camp. Alexandros was excruciatingly aware that his mentor was watching; he seemed to summon his composure, rally all his senses. The boy stepped forward, shield at high port. He straightened to attention before Polynikes and enunciated in his loudest, clearest voice:

"This is my shield.
I bear it before me into battle,
but it is not mine alone.
It protects my brother on my left.
It protects my city.
I will never let my brother
out of its shadow
nor my city out of its shelter.
I will die with my shield before me
facing the enemy."

The boy finished. The last words, shouted at the top of his voice, echoed for a long moment around the valley walls. Twenty-five hundred men stood listening and watching.

They could see Polynikes nod, satisfied. He barked an order. The boys resumed formation, each now with his shield in proper place, upright against its owner's knees.

"Shields, port!"

The boys lunged for their *hopla*.

Polynikes swung the tripod.

With a crack that could be heard across the valley, the slashing sticks struck the bronze of Alexandros' shield.

Polynikes swung again, at the next boy and next. All shields leapt into the boys' grips, all swiftly into place before them.

There.

With a nod to the platoon's drill instructor, Polynikes stepped back. The boys held fast at attention, shields at high port, with the blood beginning to cake dry on their empurpled cheekbones and shattered noses.

Polynikes repeated his order to the drill instructor that these boys would attack trees till the end of the second watch, then shield drill until dawn.

He walked once down the line, meeting each boy's eye. Before Alexandros, he halted.

"Your nose was too pretty, son of Olympieus. It was a girl's nose. He tossed the boy's tripod into the dirt at his feet. "I like it better now."

PRINCIPLES:

1. The very life of the hoplite and the very survival of his city-state were dependent upon his ability to become a better warrior than any of his potential enemies.



2. To accomplish this objective he must be willing to deny himself all the pleasures accorded to a normal life. He must remain ever vigilant in order to become the best-prepared soldier in the army, who with deadly efficiency could instantly convert from “at ease” to “battle ready” and perform with unflagging endurance under maximum pressure while not only assaulting and killing the enemy but also protecting his fellow soldier.
3. This is the mental attitude of the winner on the Greek battlefield. And the event that demonstrated Alexandros had not yet attained it was the defaming of his shield.
4. Polynikes was harsh but at some future time had Alexandros not learned to honor his shield he would not only be killed by the enemy but the man to his left would be exposed to immediate danger and the people of Sparta placed in jeopardy.
5. Polynikes did not seek to kill Alexandros but rather prepare him to kill others as a dependable member of some future Lakedaemonian phalanx. This Spartan line of battle is described in:

Hanson, *The Wars of the Ancient Greeks*, 50-53:

Customarily the army of one city-state met their adversary in daylight in formal columnar formation—the word phalanx means ‘rows’ or ‘stacks’ of men—according to a recognized sequence of events.

After divination, a seer sacrificed a ram to the god. The ‘general’ made a brief exhortation, and then the assembled infantry prepared to charge the enemy. In minutes the respective armies packed together to achieve a greater density of armed men, who sought to crash together, sometimes trotting the last 200 yards between the two phalanxes. For the defenders it was often on the same soil they and their neighbors had worked a few days before. Once the neighboring community had fashioned a force of armored columns to take or hold flatland, there was very little a like-minded rival could do other than to meet the challenge in about the same manner.

After the meeting of the phalanxes, farmers, blinded by the dust and their own cumbersome helmets, stabbed away with their spears, pushed on ahead with their shields, and failing that, grabbed, kicked and bit, desperately hoping to make some inroad into the enemy’s phalanx. Success was at first gauged by the degree of motion achieved by the pushing of the ranks—the literal thrusting of a man’s shield upon the shoulders, side or back of his comrade ahead.

Only the first three ranks of the eight rows of the classical phalanx reached the enemy with their spears in the first assault.

There were countless tasks for all infantrymen of the phalanx as it pounded the enemy. Hoplites in the initial ranks sought targets with their spears, all the while searching for protection for their vulnerable right flanks in the round shields of the men at their sides. Some struggled to step over the debris of fallen equipment and the accumulation of the wounded and dead at their feet, striving always to keep their balance as they pushed and were pushed into the enemy spears at their faces.

All the hoplites in the killing zone kept their own 20-pound shield chest high to cover themselves and the men on their own immediate left. Thus all at once hoplites might feel steady pressure from the rear, dodge enemy spearpoints and friendly spear-butts jostling in their faces, stab and push ahead, accommodate comrades shoving from the left to find protection, seek their own cover by nudging to friends’ shields on their right, and nearly tripping over wounded bodies, corpses, and abandoned equipment that was lying at their feet.



Once the phalanx ripped and stormed through the ranks of its adversary, the opponent often totally collapsed through panic and fright, perhaps not more than half an hour after the initial collision. The short duration and sudden disintegration of battle are understandable if we keep in mind the combatants were squeezed together in columns, trapped in heavy bronze under the summer sun, mostly robbed of sight and hearing, in a sea of dust and blood.

6. To prepare Alexandros to not only survive in such a din of chaos but to win, Polynikes had to instill in the soul of this youth principles that would eventually create the mental attitude of a winner.
7. To accomplish this objective the techniques of warfare were practiced over and over and over again.