

26th February 2022

Boots

**“There’s a man all over for you,
blaming on his boots the fault of his feet.”**

Samuel Beckett, Waiting for Godot

I’ve been doing a lot of hill-walking, and my boots have given out. They’re in a sorry state. As I lamented their demise, I was watching images of Russian troops beginning a devastating invasion of Ukraine. And I went back to a poem from my favourite poet, Rudyard Kipling. First published in 1903 in *The Five Nations*, it’s called “Boots”, and describes the repetitive thoughts of soldiers forced to march in South Africa during the second Boer War. It was later set to music, maintaining the rhythmical cadence Kipling intended. Reading the poem again, I was struck by these stanzas:

*We’re foot – slog – slog – slog – sloggin’ over Africa!
Foot – foot – foot – foot – sloggin’ over Africa –
(Boots – boots – boots – boots – movin’ up and down again!)
There’s no discharge in the war!*

*Don’t – don’t – don’t – don’t – look at what’s in front of you.
(Boots – boots – boots – boots – movin’ up an’ down again!)
Men – men – men – men – men go mad with watchin’ ’em,
And there’s no discharge in the war!*

*Count – count – count – count – the bullets in the bandoliers.
If – your – eyes – drop – they will get atop o’ you
(Boots – boots – boots – boots – movin’ up and down again!)
There’s no discharge in the war!*

*I – ’ave – marched – six – weeks in ’Ell an’ certify
It – is – not – fire – devils, dark or anything,
But boots – boots – boots – boots – movin’ up an’ down again,
An’ there’s no discharge in the war!*

In the Somme, Normandy, the Falklands, Iraq, Afghanistan, the Ukraine, those boots “movin’ up and down again” are on the feet of people like you and me. The destruction of war is not what happens in the Situation Room, Command Post, Operations Hub or Cabinet Room. The cost is to people who march to their “weeks in ‘Ell” with their boots on, and those who don’t know what’s in front of them. They will be in my prayers tonight.

A prayer for today

Our feet are at fault if they march us to war. May our boots walk in the ways of peace. Amen