

UNARMED COMBAT

It's a pleasant day in early April. Winter is no more than a memory and today we are learning how to kill people. Or maim them. Maybe both. I'm not sure yet.

Together we chant the sergeant's mantra:

One-two-three-four,

Step-on-his-jaw,

Just-to-make-sure.

'Next!'

Last January we slept in our boots on Dartmoor. We learnt the lesson on the first morning. If you leave your boots outside the tent, they freeze like solid blocks of ice. The answer is to keep them on all night. This means lying on your back in your sleeping-bag with your feet pointing upwards. It's awkward at first but you get used to it. When you're fourteen-years-old, sleeping isn't usually terribly difficult.

One-two-three-four,

Step-on-his-jaw,

Just-to-make-sure.

'Next!'

This spring the school's Combined Cadet Force is camping in the Thetford battle area. We have spent much of the week crawling through damp bracken and sheep's droppings but we've camped in many worse places and will do again.

This afternoon a group of us has volunteered to undergo training in unarmed combat. It sounded more fun than signals, mortars or map-reading. We are in the care of our instructor: square, unhurried, amiable, Sergeant Jones.

Methodically, almost languorously, Sergeant Jones disarms, disables and dispatches us by numbers.

'You take the arm. You break the arm. You twist the wrist. And over he goes.'

Perhaps it's a little chilling but it's also oddly hypnotic.

'You take the arm. You break the arm. You twist the wrist. And over he goes.'

One at a time, we rush at Sergeant Jones with wooden weapons. Step-by-step — cool and unflurried — he goes about his business.

'You take the arm. You break the arm. You twist the wrist. And over he goes.'

I'm not certain what we're learning except that Sergeant Jones is the master of his craft. If we have to watch him very much longer, we may become bored and rather restless but, for the present, it passes the time.

One-two-three-four,

Step-on-his-jaw,

Just-to-make-sure.

'Next!'

All afternoon the sun shines down on us benignly. Tonight the damp bracken and sheep's droppings will remain unfrozen and we will sleep peacefully in our socks.