

Would You Believe... "Sergeant Shakespeare"?  
Joe Conlon, 11 July 1998

On February 2, 1585, William Shakespeare's twins Hamnet and Judith were baptized in Holy Trinity Church in Stratford-Upon-Avon. In 1592 the poet Robert Greene alluded to Shakespeare in his pamphlet "A Groatsworth of Wit Bought With a Million of Repentance." The period between these two dates is known as the "Lost Years" or "The Dark Years" because of the total lack of hard evidence as to what William Shakespeare was doing during this time. Sometime during this period he left home, wife, and three children in Stratford and began his stage career in London. Scholars have long attempted to determine how and why this decision was made, and countless theories have been proposed. It is my hypothesis that Shakespeare, like countless other Englishmen, was caught up in the national crisis caused by the threat of the Spanish Armada during the summer of 1587 and was either drafted into the militia or volunteered for duty to protect his homeland from the threat of foreign invasion. In short, he became a soldier, was posted to the London area, and was discharged when the threat was ended. Once the boy had seen the big city, it is hard to send him back to the farm.

Before supporting the hypothesis of Shakespeare's possible military activity, it would be useful to briefly look at some of the other theories which have been advanced to account for the lost years. One such is that he had been a schoolmaster during part of this time. The main evidence is based on a statement by a theatrical manager named William Beeston who was unquestionably associated with Shakespeare during his career in London. It is a reasonable and possible hypothesis which could account for part of the seven missing years.

A less probable tradition has him as a runaway apprentice, but there is no solid, believable evidence to support this legend. Another widely believed tradition which is almost certainly false is that he left Stratford to avoid prosecution for deer poaching. This theory was broadly based on a rumor involving the Lucy family's deer park. The entire story falls apart because of the simple fact that the Lucys did not have a deer park during the time Shakespeare was in Stratford and indeed did not have one until late in the seventeenth century.

Another, far more plausible, theory is that Shakespeare left Stratford when he joined an acting company as a replacement for a missing actor when that company came through Stratford and needed several recruits. Interestingly enough in the summer of 1587 there were no fewer than five companies on tour that performed in Stratford. Shakespeare would have been twenty-three years old at the time. The normal apprenticeship for an actor in the 1580's was seven years. This in itself would largely account for Shakespeare's activities during the period known as the lost years.

It must be understood that there is to date no hard evidence to support any of the above theories. We must rely on circumstantial evidence, logic, and an understanding of the economic and political realities of the world of Elizabeth I.

In the 1570's famine was affecting all of Europe. Starvation was common and there were even rumors of Tartar women eating their own children. At the same time there was an economic recession mainly due to a slump in the cloth and wool trades. Grain was the staple of the diet in the working classes. With poor harvests and rising prices it was the single largest expense for those without land to grow their own food. Starvation for many seemed inevitable. Heavy rains for two consecutive summers ruined harvests causing spreading famine in England as population grew faster than crops.

In the 1570's and 1580's the gap between rich and poor was widening; wealth and power were concentrated in the hands of the few, and many people were unable to find a job. England's population was exploding -- from about 2.5 million in 1500 to almost 5 million by 1600. Rising population translated into inflated prices as too many people chased after scarce resources. Wages stayed unacceptably low. With so many laborers saturating the job market, employers could easily find willing workers at pathetically low wages.

Unemployment was high, and there was no formal system of welfare to support the unemployed. These dismal conditions forced thousands to "hit the road" in search of work, and they migrated towards London.

Travel was dangerous for many reasons. Just as an example, people caught "on the road" without proper, required travel papers which stated where and why they were traveling were considered as "vagrants, vagabonds, or sturdy beggars." Penalties could be severe. Roads were wretched and plagued with thieves and highwaymen. At least 50% of all the travelers who came to London died of plague or fever. Yet still they came in the thousands.

London was the largest city in all of Europe -- well over 100,000 people. Disease, sickness, and death were regular features of life in the enormous city. Bubonic plague was the number one killer and smallpox ran a close second. Tuberculosis took lives daily. The spread of these contagious diseases was caused by a total ignorance about personal and public hygiene. Baths were infrequent, and toothbrushes hadn't yet been invented. Most Elizabethans had bad breath, rotting teeth, body odor, constant stomach disorders and running sores or scabs all over their skin.

City ditches were used as public toilets. Butchers threw dead animal carcasses into the street to rot. Housewives tossed putrid garbage and night soil into the streets or river. The bodies of the rich lying beneath church floors in burial vaults often forced the congregations to evacuate the building because the stench of decomposition became overpowering.

Public executions were popular entertainment. The convicted criminal often sat in a cart with a noose around his neck and was left hanging when it drove away. Death by axe was even gorier and could often take two or three chops before the victim was dead. The executioner held up the head for all to see. Witch burnings were popular, gruesome, and becoming more frequent.

English explorers were discovering and opening up brand new worlds. Such explorers as Sir Francis Drake, Martin Frobisher, Hugh Willoughby, the Cabot family and John Davis were public heroes and their exploits were the talk of the country. English naval explorers combined the roles of pirate, missionary, and adventurer and spoke of a new order in the making, promising both riches and glory to the bold. Seductive new spices, strange clothes, glittering jewels, and exotic looking foreign traders were jumping off the pages of travel accounts and into the London markets. Books describing these things flooded the marketplace.

Foreign travel was limited to four basic groups: 1) the rich gentlemen who study in a foreign university in Italy or France, 2) acting companies touring the continent, 3) merchants and traders, and 4) the military.

Elizabethans were obsessed with notions of order, obedience, duty, and hierarchy. One of the explicit aims of the school system was to enforce these notions and educate pupils to be good, dutiful subjects of the commonwealth. To shirk duties or obligations was an unforgivable offense against the social order.

Throughout the 1580's Catholic Spain was actively attempting to stir up a Catholic revolt in England and fomented several assassination attempts against Queen Elizabeth. Anxiety gripped individuals, families, and the whole society. During the winter of 1586 which saw Mary Queen of Scots' trial and death, it became obvious that the Spanish were building up an enormous concentration of naval and army forces beyond the Bay of Biscay. The fact that invasion plans were imminent was apparent.

The Spanish Armada of 1588 was the greatest naval force ever assembled. The Marquis of Santa Cruz, general of the open sea, had proposed a force consisting of 556 vessels including 196 battle ships, 40 fly boats, and 200 flat bottomed barges to be manned by 94,222 men. There were over 13,000 highly trained soldiers and about 6,500 sailors. Another 20,000 veteran soldiers under the command of the greatest soldier general in Europe, the Duke of Parma, awaited transportation to England in the ports of Flanders.

The Spanish had assembled 1,150 naval guns and 2,341 field artillery guns. The strategy was simple. The overwhelming naval force was to proceed to the ports, pick up Parma's armies, sail across the English Channel, land on the English coast, and disembark the troops. The massive army would conquer the English while the fleet offered artillery support from offshore. It was a simple plan and the force was certainly large enough to do the job. Yet the English had other ideas.

The threat of Spanish invasion had awoken an intensity of alarm and patriotic fervor in every part of the country since the previous winter. In late 1586 the Privy Council authorized the immediate preparation of a preemptive expedition to sail in the spring to impede and if possible, delay the concentration of the vast and threatening Spanish force. It was to be financed as a private joint stock venture and command was entrusted to Sir Francis Drake. The main body of the Queen's navy was based in the Medway and Thames estuary to guard against an invasion from the Netherlands. Drake's Flying Force in early 1587 was fitting out at Plymouth and consisted of twenty-three warships and pinnaces, with ten companies of soldiers for shore operations. He began his first sorties at the beginning of April, 1587.

Drake's first sortie was a stunning success. On April 19th, he attacked a secondary concentration of shipping (80 ships) at Cadiz, Spain's chief Atlantic port. All ships ready to sail were seized and given to prize crews. All others were plundered and burned along with all stores and provisions. Altogether 13,000 tons of Spanish shipping were destroyed before Drake withdrew - a massive humiliation in Spain's own chief Atlantic harbor. They sank 33 ships and stole four, then went on to wreak more havoc burning supplies, seizing provisions and capturing a huge silk and spice laden Portuguese carrack which when sold doubled his investors' capital. Drake returned to Plymouth on June 26th laden with treasure. His exploits made him the most famous man in the world.

In the spring of 1587 Elizabeth's treasury was over-strained by the costs of maintaining an army in the Netherlands. There seemed no end to the corruption and inefficiency of the military administration. In just the first year the war in the Netherlands had swallowed half her peacetime revenue and over 5,000 men.

Though it was an expensive war, national sentiment was solidly behind the queen. A wave of patriotism spread across the land in response to the threat of foreign invasion. There was widespread fear and some instance of panic. Rumors of imminent disaster were rife. The nation began to mobilize.

Armies of the time consisted of a permanent core, a native militia, hired mercenaries (often foreign), and a recruitment of natives not already in the militia. England had no standing, permanent army, but from 1585 to 1597 England sent over 47,000 soldiers to fight in various European theaters. They engaged in campaigns in Ireland, France, and the Netherlands. There was a small but permanent navy whose talk of foreign lands was a part of a Londoner's daily conversation. It was an era of preemptive strikes, precautionary interventions, police operations, and preparations against invasion.

There were never enough militant gentry to even keep the militia trained - let alone staff the army. The great majority of ordinary soldiers and NCO's (non-commissioned officers) served reluctantly. Though military service might seem like a good opportunity for the unemployed, it was unpopular for the following reasons: 1) Pay was small and often unreliable. 2) Conditions were bad and discipline harsh. 3) Food was awful with typical daily rations of a dry, stale biscuit, moldy cheese, and sour beer. It was therefore difficult to keep the military adequately manned and the ranks were often filled with ex-convicts and disreputable sorts. Underhanded methods were often used to forcibly press men into service.

The government gave communities quotas they must fill of conscripts in time of emergency. These men were "scoured out" by licensed recruiters who were paid for each man they rounded up. The lowest and most crucial officer in the recruiting system was the parish constable, charged by the justice of the peace to order adult males to present themselves

for selection. To avoid the draft it would be necessary to bribe or browbeat the constable.

The building block within an army was the company (150 men) under the key officer, a captain. He was to be assisted by a sergeant, six corporals, and a drummer. Since all army pay was distributed through the captain, they often retained as few NCO's as possible and simply pocketed the pay of the "phantom NCO's". Corruption was rampant with almost unlimited opportunities for cheating the Crown. Falsified musters (inflated with imaginary or absentee soldiers) multiplied the numbers the Queen had to pay, clothe, and feed.

In the summer of 1585 the Earl of Leicester in Kenilworth had been appointed to raise a military expedition to fight in the Netherlands. Leicester was the natural lord over the Stratford area and would have been responsible in 1587 for mustering a local defense force.

Neither arms nor organization of England's amateur army matched their numbers or fervor in the summer of 1588. They had been raised for the emergency by the Justices of the Peace and were commanded by the Lord Lieutenants and Deputy Lieutenants of the Shires. They were neither provisioned or well armed. In fact, 4,000 had arrived in Tilbury after a 20 mile march without a loaf of bread among them.

Lord Howard Effingham, the Lord Admiral, had assumed command in December of 1587 and began to mobilize and man the small main English fleet in the Thames estuary. Throughout the month of April, 1588, Drake wrote letters to the Queen begging her leave to attack the Spanish while they were still in port. A large company of volunteers for the expedition had assembled in Plymouth. In May there were English battle fleets sortieing out of Plymouth, the Downs, and London. On the Essex coast an amateur army under Lord Leicester (the nobleman in charge of Stratford and Worcester area) was waiting for the expected imminent landings of the Spanish.

In every southern county that spring, militiamen and volunteers were forming under Deputy Lieutenants and young veterans of the Netherlands campaigns. "Black" Sir John Norris was in charge of coastal defenses from Kent to Dorset; 3,000 men under Sir George Carey were hurried to the Isle of Wight, believed to be a principal Spanish objective. Sir Walter Raleigh and Sir Richard Grenville took over joint defense of Devon and Cornwall.

By June there were 25,000 troops to defend the coast in Essex. Another 14,000 troops under Lord Hunsdon had assembled in Kent for the personal defense of the Queen.

On June 18th the country was officially informed the Armada had set sail four weeks earlier. The country was in turmoil and anxiously awaiting news. All England knew a powerful army under the greatest commander of the age, Parma, was waiting on the Flemish coast for a chance to invade, and the largest fleet ever assembled was at large in the Atlantic to enable it to do so. Since the possible landing sites for the Spanish were so many, English forces were unable to concentrate in any one area and were dangerously thin. All of England lived in fear of surprise attack.

Weather during June was freakishly stormy with unsettled winds and southwesterly gales which wreaked havoc on both Spanish and English forces and often prevented resupply of the ships.

As darkness fell on Friday, July 19, 1588, on every height along the Cornish and Devonshire coasts and far inland warning beacons were lit. It was the long awaited signal carrying the news to all of England that the Invincible Armada had been sighted off her shores ready to land. In every shire, as the signal was passed, a whole nation sprang to arms to defend its Queen and realm.

From Friday to Monday, July 22nd, a continuous stream of small ships and boats poured out from the little Dorset ports of Lyme, Charmouth, and Bridport, bringing the English fleet

volunteers, supplies of food, fresh vegetables, and ammunition as thousands of spectators crowded the low hills above Chesil Beach and West Bay watching the grim progress of the massive armada.

At dawn on July 22nd, Drake in *The Revenge* captured, without a shot, the crippled major Spanish galleon, *Nuestra Senora* together with its Admiral, Don Pedro de Valdes, complete with treasure, 46 guns, and a crew of 460. The hold contained a store of 1,000 iron shot and 200 barrels of high-grade gunpowder sorely needed by the English.

On July 23rd, another massive but inconclusive battle raged close to the Portland cliffs. Frobisher in the 1,000 ton *Triumph*, largest of the English fleet, was heavily engaged and was in growing danger as distances narrowed between combatants. The battle began shortly after dawn. Drake swept in around noon as the wind changed and saved the day. The engagement lasted until 5:00 p.m. with the Spanish reforming and retreating under Drake's attack. The English were forced to withdraw as they ran increasingly short of ammunition.

On Thursday, July 25th, for the first time in history, England's Navy decided on a squadron strategy of battle rather than fighting as individual ships. The four squadrons were commanded by Howard, Drake, Hawkins, and Frobisher. Frobisher's ship, *The Triumph*, was attacked by three galleons and in imminent danger of being boarded. The rest of the squadron was under similar attack including *Arc Royal* which had gone to Frobisher's aid. Again Drake arrived in a flurry to save the day and threatened to cut the armada in two. *Medina Sidonia* was forced to withdraw from the Isle of Wight area. The engagement was broken off about 3:00 p.m. The Spaniards had had all they could take, and the English were again almost out of ammunition.

Even though the English had gotten the better of the Spanish during the naval engagements so far, the situation was becoming desperate. The English strategic position required that they win a decisive naval engagement before the Spanish were able to embark Parma's troops from the Flemish coast. If those troops set foot on English soil, nothing would be likely to save the country from probable defeat.

The entire British navy united under the Lord Admiral off the Dunkirk coast. This roughly brought the number (though not the size) of the two combatants to near equality.

At midnight on Sunday, July 28th, a single gun fired from the *Arc Royal* signaled eight fire ships to set off line abreast into the heart of the armada. A raging forest of fire bore down on the Spanish flagship and galleons around it. Panic broke out as captains cut cables abandoning anchors and put to sea in utter confusion. Many Spanish ships collided in the dark. Dawn found the armada drifting east of Gravelines, its formation lost and scattered over a large area of sea unable to anchor. The English pounced in four squadrons: *Victory*, *Frobisher* in *Triumph*, *Winter* in *Vanguard*, *Seymore* in *Rainbow*, *Howard* in *Arc Royal*, *Fenton* in *Mary Rose*, and *Cheshire* Sir George Beeston (89 years old) in *Dreadnought*, pounced like wolves in a pack on the helpless Spanish. By the end of the day not a single Spanish galleon remained capable of fighting. The battle raged for nine hours and about 6:00 p.m. what remained of the Spanish fleet limped away as the English had completely run out of ammunition.

A northeast gale began to blow that evening and threatened to drive the Spaniards onto the dreaded Zealand Banks. At 11:00 p.m. by what seemed a miracle the wind suddenly shifted to the south-west and allowed Spanish forces to escape the shadowing English who were unable to respond being out of ammunition. The Spaniards in their war council had had enough and decided to attempt the 2,200 mile return to Spain for refit and repair. The English shadowed them for four days and then, out of ammunition, food, and water turned and ran for home.

In Tilbury and Colchester the Militia of Essex had been standing to arms since the beginning of summer. The defense forces raised through the Justices of the Peace and the Head Constables of the Hundreds in the previous six weeks numbered over 28,000 - more

than at any time since the Norman conquest. In Kent were 8,000 volunteers under Lord Hundson (The Lord Chamberlain) protecting the Queen.

On August 7th, 1588, at the height of the uncertainty as to the outcome of the battle, Elizabeth made her famous speech to her assembled troops. What she said exemplified both the spirit of Elizabeth and the patriotism of the assembled English soldiers.

"My loving people, We have been persuaded by some that are careful for our safety, to take heed how we commit ourselves to armed multitudes for fear of treachery. But I assure you I do not desire to live to distrust my faithful and loving people. Let tyrants fear. I have always so behave myself that, under God, I have placed my chiefest strength and safeguard in the loyal hearts and goodwill of my subjects. And therefore I am come amongst you, as you see, at this time, not for my recreation and disport, but being resolved in the midst and heat of battle, to live or die amongst you all, to lay down for my God, for my kingdom, and for my people, my honour and my blood, even in the dust. I know I have the body of a weak and feeble woman, but I have the heart and stomache of a king, and of a king of England too, and think foul scorn that Parma or Spain or any Prince of Europe should dare to invade the borders of my realm." (Elizabeth I, Bryant, p. 160-161)

Although they didn't know it, the battle was over. English casualties were astonishingly low. In the entire campaign against the Armada less than 100 Englishmen lost their lives in action, and because of the superb English seamanship not even a single ship of theirs was sunk or boarded.

However, what the Spanish failed to achieve, disease did. Admiral Howard's fleet struggled into port at Yarmouth, Harwich and Margate in want of food, water, and ammunition. Epidemic toxæmia from putrid rations and typhus from filthy hygiene and living conditions were raging in his ships and killed twenties for every one Englishman killed in battle.

Even before November 19th, when the Queen knelt in St. Paul's to give thanks for England's deliverance, the bulk of both the navy and the army had been discharged to avoid the expense of their pay. Only the Lord Admiral who advanced half the money needed from his own resources prevented the Queen from discharging the starving and diseased sailors without paying their back wages.

The Armada campaign was a bitter and humiliating defeat for King Philip. It decided that England would remain independent and Protestant. What followed was a long war of attrition in which little was gained by either side, but which both paid for heavily in both wealth and human life. Spain launched three further armadas in 1596, 1597, and 1601, but all were dismal failures. It was England's longest war since the 14th and 15th centuries' war with France. "Between 1589 and 1595 England sent five expeditions to Brittany and Normandy, employing 20,000 men, of whom more than half died, mostly of diseases." (Bryant, p. 170)

In addition to the Spaniards, England was also involved in attempting to put down the bloody and costly Irish rebellion of Hugh Roe O'Donnell and the great O'Neil, Earl of Tyrone from 1597 to 1601.

So what was the outcome of the armada campaign of the summer of 1588 for the English?

Mixed at best. A wave of patriotism flushed with victory engulfed the land. People were proud to be Englishmen but the war remained to be paid for and continued to drag on. Thousands of displaced soldiers and sailors were discharged where they stood. Often without their pay and with little more than the rags on their backs, they were left to fend for themselves. Elizabeth's treasury was bankrupt, and she was forced to sell off royal monastic lands to raise money. More than 6,000 citizen soldiers, officered by merchants and shopkeepers who had been drilling twice a week at Mile End preparing to defend London were discharged and left to their own devices.

Let us now return to Shakespeare and try to fit him into the scene I have described. Any man is a product of the age in which he lives. So it must be with Shakespeare. In the winter of 1587 and spring of 1588 Shakespeare would have been a 24 year old husband and father of three small children. As a product of the Stratford grammar school and the son of a town leader we must assume he had assimilated the same values of duty, order, and patriotism toward Queen and country that I have mentioned. Certainly, all of the plays indicate an author with this outlook. The Spanish threat must have been a constant topic of daily conversation in the community and a growing worry. I believe he would have been almost compelled to join in the defense of his home and family. Even in the improbable event that he felt no patriotic fervor himself, it would have been almost impossible for him to dodge the draft given his position in the community and the activities of the Earl of Leicester, the justices of the peace, and the town constables who were "scouring" the countryside for soldiers to fill their quotas of conscripts. It is therefore only logical to conclude that he must have been caught up in the local militia at least, if not in the regular army or navy, sometime during the spring or summer of 1588.

Additional circumstantial evidence can be found within the plays written by Shakespeare. Countless references in many plays show he had an intimate knowledge of the soldier's life. Often portrayed as thieves, soldiers were forced into thievery by late or non-existent pay and short rations. The night scene evoked by the chorus in Henry V, act IV, scene i, that describes the camps before the battle of Agincourt is suggestive of an intimate knowledge of military encampment. There are scenes in the Henry IV plays and elsewhere that show an intimate knowledge also of recruiting practices. It is probably impossible with any certainty to establish where he might have served if indeed he was drafted that year.

The Earl of Leicester was on the Essex coast and he undoubtedly had some Stratford men with him. Lord Hundson was in Kent responsible for protecting the Queen herself. We know for certain that just a few years later Shakespeare knew Lord Hundson and indeed in 1592-1594 was having an affair with the old Chamberlain's mistress. It is at least possible that their relationship began during the campaign of 1588 when they may have served together.

The first researcher to suggest that Shakespeare might have been a soldier was William Thoms in a Notelet published in 1865. Duff Cooper in his 1949 book *Sergeant Shakespeare* was convinced of the idea that Shakespeare had been a soldier. I too am convinced that he must have served, at least in the militia, and at least for a short time during the summer of 1588. His involvement could have been greater, but it could not logically have been less.

In all probability when the crisis was over, he would have been discharged with thousands of other citizen soldiers and left to his own wits to survive. He was perhaps in the London area and perhaps had drilled at Mile End. There was little opportunity of work to draw him back to Stratford and after the excitement of London, Stratford must have seemed pretty small to the young Shakespeare. What to do? He did have contacts in the London area.

Richard Field, formerly of Stratford, was the son of an associate of Shakespeare's father and was a prosperous printer in London. In 1593 and 1594 he published for Shakespeare his two poems, "Venus and Adonis" and "The Rape of Lucrece." It is quite possible it was to Field that Shakespeare turned for help upon his discharge. Field had connections with the acting companies through his printing business and would have had little trouble

securing a position with one of them for his young friend. After that, Shakespeare's talents would have done the rest.

As you can see, my proposed scenario would solve most of the mystery of the lost years. Shakespeare would have a good and logical reason for leaving family and home and arriving in London. Once there, the excitement of the city and the opportunities for wealth and fame would have kept him there. The remaining time of the lost years would have been taken up by the apprenticeship as he learned his craft. Throughout his career Shakespeare thought of himself as an actor first and a playwright only through necessity. Sadly it is impossible at this time to either prove or disprove my hypothesis because of lack of documentary evidence. But who knows; perhaps some day a roster with William Shakespeare of Stratford-On-Avon's name on it, or a diary entry of some soldier talking about his buddy, Will, or a love letter written home to a missed family, may turn up that will allow us to lay to rest the long standing mystery of the "Lost Years". Until that time we must rely on our wits and conjecture - not that the lost years are all that important anyway. After all, "The play's the thing...."

THE END

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