

18

Sparta: Home of the Brave

Stranger, tell the Spartans that we lie here obedient to their laws."

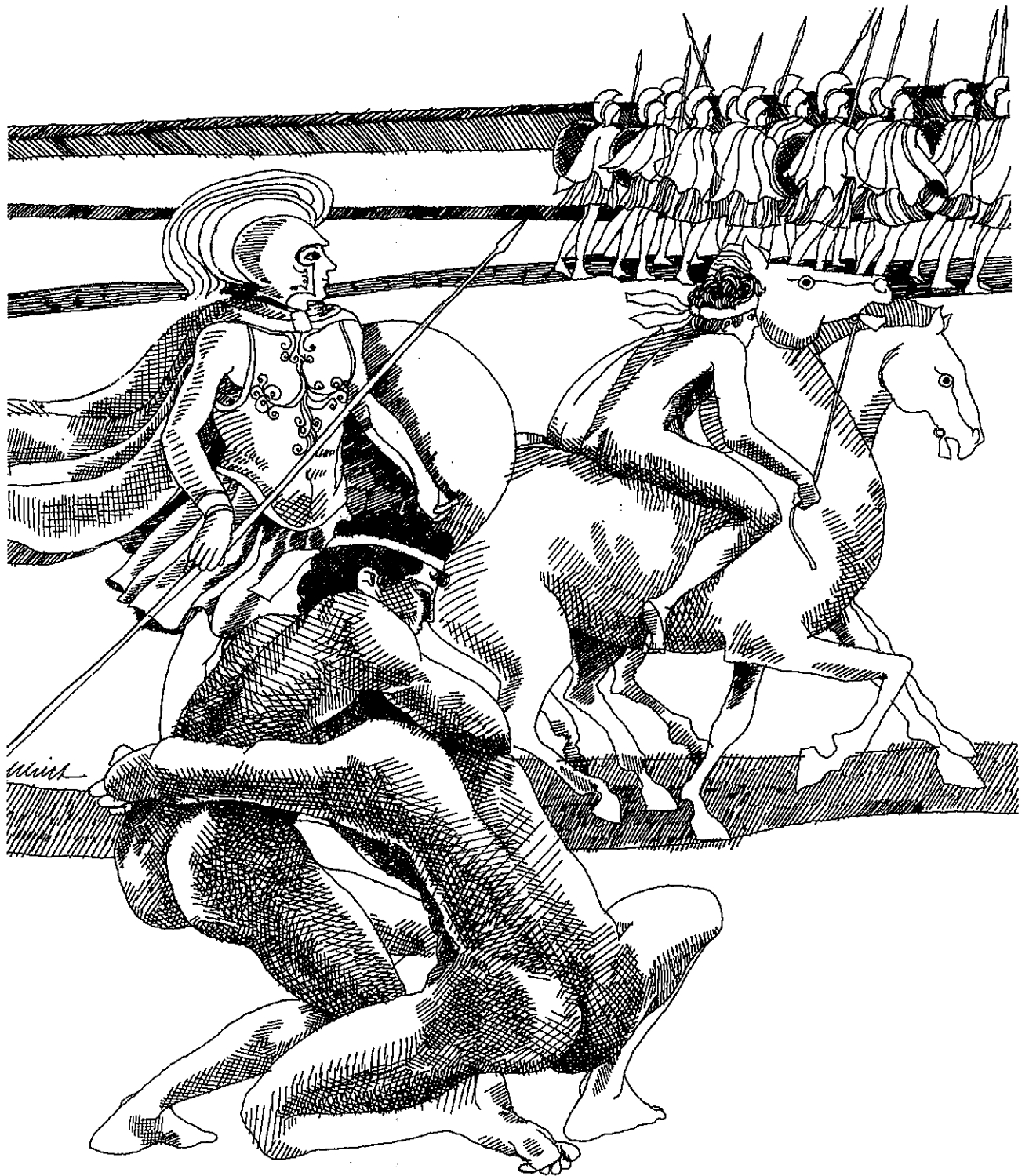
These words were written on the grave of 300 Spartan soldiers. They had fought to the last man against a large army of Persians at Thermopylae (thur-MAHP-eh-lee) in 480 B.C. Before the battle, they were told that the arrows of the Persians would fly in such numbers that they would hide the sun. A Spartan soldier said, "So much the better. We shall fight in the shade."

Spartan soldiers were the best in Greece, and they were very brave. They did not give up or run. They fought until they won—or died. Spartan fighters were trained to be that way from the time they were born. They were taught to become good soldiers and obey their lead-

ers. They were not allowed to have any trade or job. That was for slaves. Spartan men had to be soldiers, and nothing else.

Why did Sparta raise its boys to become professional soldiers? Like other Greek city-states, Sparta did not have enough land to feed its people. Other city-states solved the problem by sending some of their people to overseas colonies. Sparta solved the problem another way. It made war on its neighbor, Messenia (meh-SEE-nee-uh). Sparta took over the land of Messenia and made slaves of the people. In the area Sparta now ruled, there were about 10 slaves for every Spartan citizen.

About 650 B.C., the slaves rebelled against their masters. It took the Spartans almost 20 years to put down the



slaves. After that the Spartans lived in fear of other slave rebellions. They decided that they should have a strong army ready at all times. So Spartans were trained to be tough soldiers and obey orders. They spent almost all their time building their bodies. They cared very little about improving their minds. Usually they looked down upon any new ideas.

Athletic Women. Spartan women lived very differently from those of Athens. They were citizens and were considered the equals of men. Although they could not become soldiers, they were strong and athletic. Young girls did not do housework or sew like Athenian girls did. That sort of work was considered only fit for slaves. Instead, girls wrestled, boxed, raced, and generally lived an outdoor life. The state encouraged this. It was believed that athletic women would have healthy sons who would become good soldiers. Women married when they were about 20 years old. They were encouraged to have as many children as possible. Sometimes women had two husbands at once and had children with both of them.

Family life was controlled by the state. Husbands and wives did not spend much time together. Husbands were usually off at war, or training with their fellow soldiers. Plutarch (PLOOR-tark), a Greek historian, noted that sometimes married couples spent only a little time together in the evenings. Sometimes they were married for months before

they saw each other in the daylight. Daughters were raised at home, but not sons. Young boys were taken from their parents and trained as future soldiers.

Training of Agis. Agis (AY-jess) was a typical Spartan boy. Soon after he was born, a group of Spartan leaders looked him over. They saw that he was a healthy baby and gave him back to his parents. Agis was lucky. Sick or weak Spartan babies were thrown into a deep hole to die.

Agis had parents who did not spoil him. They taught him to be content with very plain food. They taught him not to fear the dark and never to cry.

At the age of seven, Agis had to leave home and live in a camp with other young boys. He slept on a hard bed and wore few clothes, even in cold weather. He was taught by a trainer

- to stand pain,
- to speak only when he was spoken to,
- to answer in a few words,
- to respect his elders without question,
- to obey every order completely,
- to harden his body, and
- to eat very little.

When Agis became a teenager, he was sometimes sent to live alone in the woods. He was given no food. He had to find food, or steal it. If he didn't, he would starve. If caught, he would be whipped. This was to train the future soldier to take care of himself.

Agis and the other boys in his camp played rough games. In one game, two teams of 15 players each fought each

other to keep a ball. Biting, punching, and kicking were allowed. The winning team was the one that had the ball when time was called. In another game, two teams fought each other on an island in a river. The team that pushed the other into the river won.

Spartan sports were not always so rough. Agis was taught to drill and exercise with music playing. He and the other boys were taught to read and write. But they had very little use for books.

At 18, Agis was considered a man. He trained with the army and was allowed to let his hair grow long. Spartans believed that long hair was a sign of manliness. They liked to curl it and adorn it too. At 24, Agis became a first-class soldier. At 30, he became a full citizen. He was now allowed to marry and start a family. It was the first time he lived in a real home since he was a small boy.

Even so, Agis had to eat dinner every day with other soldiers rather than with his family. He often slept in the soldiers' barracks, rather than at home. When war came, he had to put on his armor and

march off. He had to serve in the army until he was 60.

It was better for Agis not to run away or give up in a battle. The Spartans were rough on "cowards." Soldiers who quit in a battle lost all their rights. Other Spartans would have nothing to do with them or with their families. Spartan women had the same spirit. When a Spartan soldier went to war, his mother told him, "Come back with your shield, or on it."

Name: _____

Date: _____

Period: _____

Sparta: Home of the Brave
(questions on the reading)

1. Describe the life of a Spartan boy

2. List six virtues (*positive characteristics*) of Spartan soldiers

-
-
-
-
-
-

3. What was the role of Spartan women in their society? (how were they thought of by the rest of society?)

4. Define, in your own words, what "*Spartan*" means.

5. In what ways as the life of Spartan men influenced thinking in many aspects of our society?