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COMMAND: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Royal Australian Navy

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The Journal of Character and Leadership Development (JCLD) publishes scholarship related to character and leadership development. This is traditionally done through the actual journal. Periodically, we will come across scholarship that doesn't quite fit into the structure and timing of the JCLD, but is important enough that we want to highlight it. In order to get that information out to our readership, we developed the Occasional Paper Series. In light of current events (COVID-19) we thought it was important to put out some Occasional Papers that deal specifically with character and leadership in these uncertain times. While the following paper isn't aimed directly at the events surrounding COVID-19, the remarks by the author are applicable to current events and leaders.

COMMAND: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Rear Admiral (Ret) James Goldrick, Royal Australian Navy

Editor's Introduction

On the evening of 5 February 2020, Rear Admiral James Vincent Purcell Goldrick, Royal Australian Navy (Retired), addressed U.S. Air Force Academy (USAFA) cadets and faculty on issues of command, leadership, and the value of history. This Occasional Paper makes his lecture available to all readers and continues the Journal of Character and Leadership Development's (JCLD) intent to publish important documents as an adjunct to our "three per year" pace of the primary publication.

This lecture—presented during a Department of History Profession of Arms Speaker Series dinner and co-sponsored by the Department of History and the Center for Character and Leadership Development (CCLD)—provides cadets sage advice for their careers. Relying on his knowledge of history and experiences from 38 years of naval service, Rear Admiral Goldrick shares his thoughts on the concept of command and how it relates to judgment, innovation, training, technology, and truth.

Rear Admiral Goldrick is a naval historian, analyst of contemporary naval and maritime affairs, and a retired senior officer of the Royal Australian Navy (RAN). He currently holds the position of fellow at the Sea Power Centre – Australia. He is also an adjunct professor in the School of Humanities and Social Sciences in the University of New South Wales at the Australian Defence Force Academy (ADFA) and a member of the Naval Studies Group at the Australian Centre for the Study of Armed Conflict and Society. He is an adjunct professor in the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre of the Australian National University and a professorial fellow of the Australian National Centre for Ocean Resources and Security at the University of Wollongong. Of note, he served as the ADFA Commandant—equivalent of an American service academy superintendent—from 2003 to 2006 and again from 2011-2012.

Starting his naval career as a 15-year old Cadet-Midshipman in 1974, Rear Admiral Goldrick served at sea for many years, eventually commanding HMAS Cessnock and Sydney as well as RAN and multinational task groups in operational theaters. Senior shore assignments included leading Australia's Border Protection Command (2006-2008) and then commanding the Australian Defence College (2008-2011). Rear Admiral Goldrick retired in 2012. He is the author of *No Easy Answers: The Development of the Navies of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka*, *Before Jutland: The Naval War in Northern European Waters August 1914-February 1915* (winner of the Anderson medal of the Society of Nautical Research), *Navies of South-East Asia: A Comparative Study* (with Jack McCaffrie), and *After Jutland: The Naval War in Northern European Waters June 1916-November 1918*. He is a graduate of the RAN College, the Harvard Business School Advanced Management Program, the University of New South Wales (BA), and the University of New England (Master of Letters).

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The Utility of History

As the 21st century moves on, it seems so much has changed in military operations that nothing of the past has relevance and we have nothing to learn from our predecessors. Yet history still matters. The more things are changing, the more we need to seek to understand the nature of that change and its implications. To do that requires asking the right questions and history helps find the right questions to ask.

Air Forces and History

Even for technologically focused services, using history is vital – and air forces need to be as aware of their history as any navy or army, something clear from their own historical experience.

There are parallels between operations at sea during the First World War and those of air forces in the Second, the problems of both deriving from unbalanced and only partly understood technological development. Perhaps the greatest shared problem was that neither ships in 1914 nor aircraft in 1939 usually knew where they were to the accuracy required to do their work – and both had major difficulties in ensuring that their weapons were accurate enough to hit their intended targets. Both navies and air forces would pay a heavy price for those deficiencies. Both might have done better in the early stages of the global conflicts had they paid more attention to these problems in the years before hostilities broke out.

Why Such Failures?

Hit by a perfect storm of new technology immediately before the First World War, navies arguably had too little time to understand their new

operational challenges – although they could have made much better use of the time they had. But the story of air forces before 1939 is a little different. Many proponents of air power had promised much more than air power could achieve and the misapplication of that promise led to a number of strategic and operational errors. It is true that leading into the Second World War, there were many factors at work, particularly a lack of money, as well as the very rapid pace of development, but over-enthusiasm for the vision of air power during the 1920s and 1930s was a cause of many practical problems not being addressed or the right questions asked about what had happened between 1914 and 1918.

There were several causes for the false promise. One of the most important, if arguably indirect, was that science fiction had been invented before the first flight of a powered aircraft. The result was that many could envisage the potential of the new technology long before the necessary elements were in place. What was imagined came to be confused with what was real.

It is sometimes said that systematic historical study is the best antidote for the obsession with theory that sometimes overtakes social scientists. Perhaps a more accurate description of its function, which equally applies to its relationship with strategic theory and military doctrine, is that such study constitutes a reality check for us all.

The Personal Perspective

My perspective on command is inevitably colored by my own experience. It encompasses both multinational and inter-agency, whole of government work but I nonetheless remain a sailor – as each of us, no matter how we develop, remains a product of our original professional culture. As an aside, I had 10 years

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at star rank, all in Joint appointments and all but one year in Joint command. The longer I served in Joint command the more I realized that the different Service cultures are different because what each Service has to do is different.

All of us given command responsibilities must remember we come with baggage which we cannot ever fully drop – and we must remember this, in particular, when we are dealing with complex issues and with people from other national and professional cultures. Similarly, in assessing command performance, it is vital to remember that the commander concerned came from a particular background and with such baggage. Furthermore, there is no such thing as the perfect commander and the performance of most of us aligns much more with the judgement of the elder [Helmuth] von Moltke, chief of the German General Staff, who said “In war, with its enormous friction, even the mediocre is quite an achievement.”

What is Command?

What is command? Is there a fair practical military definition, rather than a legalistic one – which is what most definitions in military doctrine are? One of the Oxford Dictionary’s secondary meanings works well – command is the ability to use or control something. In our case, it is the ability to use or

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control military forces. But military forces are not things, they encompass both equipment and people, and the latter matter much more. As platform-based services like air forces and navies need to remember,

we are in the end assessing a human role fulfilled by humans in relation to other humans.

A summary of a general’s duties was written by the Greek philosopher Onasander in the first century of the Christian era. Onasander’s text contains some gems. ‘The duty of a general’ in battle, ‘is to ride by the ranks on horseback, show himself to those in danger, praise the brave, threaten the cowardly, encourage the lazy, fill up gaps, transpose a unit if necessary, bring aid to the wearied, anticipate the crisis, the hour and the outcome.’

This nicely covers many of the requirements of successful command throughout history. It encompasses the material, the systemic and the psychological. It is realistic about the human condition and the extent to which successful command involves leadership sufficient to overcome human weakness, both individual and collective.

The Context of Command

In analysing command performance, it is essential to place that analysis within the appropriate context – the nature of the conflict, the level at which command is exercised, the environment in which it is exercised and the military and state systems within which it is exercised.

Prior understanding of the historical relationships between command and contemporary military and state systems allows the qualities of commanders to most readily be distinguished. Results can be much more clearly attributed to a commander’s individual performance when their parent organisation has provided them with the material and doctrinal tools which confer the potential to do their job well. Thus, given that the Romans had achieved high training standards and rigid discipline, effective tactics, and

the sustained provision of logistics; the failures of many of their generals in the latter years of the Roman republic can be directly ascribed to the deficiencies of the individuals concerned. Take one example, the failure of Marcus Licinius Crassus in his disastrous campaign against the Parthians, culminating in the battle of Carrhae which resulted in the destruction of his army. Treated as a cautionary tale by Roman commentators, many of his decisions were clearly considered mistakes by his own contemporaries. Such judgements could not be as readily made in many other armies of the ancient era, when the best intentions of commanders were beset by deficiencies of discipline, communications, logistics and – perhaps above all – disease.

Similarly, before the development of improved naval technology – such as the coppering of hulls which markedly reduced the growth of marine life on their underwater hulls that very quickly affected their speed, and the provision of sustained and adequate amounts of fresh and preserved food – admirals in the era of sail were very much more constrained in their operations than their successors from the middle of the eighteenth century onwards. Nelson and his mentors, in other words, could do things with fleets which previous generations could only dream of.

On the other hand, Admirals Jellicoe and Scheer in the First World War Battle of Jutland were in an almost impossible position because so much of the technology which they operated was imperfect and not fully understood. We can say the same thing about the very early air commanders of the Second World War. An officer like Edgar Ludlow-Hewitt, commander of Britain's Bomber Command at the start of the war, was probably no less competent than Arthur Harris, commander at the end, but he did not possess the same tools.

There is a very important associated point. Operational success may manifest well after the

organisational measures have been put in place to achieve it. Just because a notable success – or an era of notable successes – has occurred does not mean that the commander in place at the time was responsible for it. This is particularly important to remember when considering a period of rapid and complex technological and organisational change.

Innovation

That said, innovation is one of the recurring elements which distinguish the most successful commanders. As often as not, such innovation is not the result of some brand-new item of technology, but rather through bringing together hitherto disparate or semi-disparate elements of combat power or simply by changing the way in which forces operate. Napoleon is perhaps the most famous example through his integration of artillery – he was trained as an artillerist – cavalry and infantry, as well as his ability to coordinate dispersed forces to combine at the critical point.

One of the points of successful command that has rarely been emphasised – although it is arguably what distinguishes sustained higher command from leadership in a particular action – is the extent to which successful commanders have utilised and developed systems to allow themselves to operate effectively. This did not mean that they did not continue on occasion to surprise – or even to subvert – their immediate subordinates to achieve an immediate effect. But it does mean that they understood that war is too complex to be managed by individual effort.

This points to a key challenge of command in a dynamic and distributed situation – how does one get subordinates and deployed units which are remote from the commander to do what the commander wants them to do, when wanted, and in the way wanted?

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This conundrum has never been solved completely, nor will it ever be. Every development of technology and society simply complicates the problem still further, as we are seeing now with social media. Yet solutions can be found. The whole idea of a staff corps and staff training in the army in the early 19th century was to overcome the problems of coordinating land forces over increasingly large areas to achieve combined effects, something that eventually, as the Battle of the Nations near Leipzig and Waterloo both demonstrated, became too much even for Napoleon. Obsessing over the details of staff duties can reach unreasonable levels amongst staff officers, but there is an enduring reality at the roots of such obsessions – commanders must be able to express themselves in ways that allow no ambiguity or uncertainty to enter the minds of their dispersed subordinates.

The navy came later to this problem than the army, although it had always faced the issue tactically. Even at a time when a general could still hurry over to the vital point of the battlefield to sort out what needed to be done, admirals could not easily transfer to other ships at sea; their means of communication were always limited and their best intentions could quickly be set at nought by an unexpected change in the wind. Furthermore, the skill required to operate square rigged ships was such that it was always possible to conceal cowardice or disaffection with the declaration that the wind and sea conditions were such that they made it impossible to obey an admiral's orders. Even at the Battle of Trafalgar, the epitome of an overwhelming naval victory, there remain questions as to the eagerness of some British ships in the rear of the columns to plunge into the battle that was raging.

What the best admirals, most notably but not only Nelson, did was both to train their fleet to the highest degree and to bring their captains into their confidence, becoming what Nelson himself termed a “band of brothers” so that, when the moment

came, the subordinates did the right thing. The best example is not Trafalgar - Nelson had little time to prepare his captains, most of whom he had not met before he joined the fleet - but the Battle of the Nile in Aboukir Bay in 1798, when the leading captain of Nelson's battle line realised that he could sail his ship inshore of the anchored French line and help take the French on two sides. The way in which the following ships then chose their positions to double and overwhelm the French van and centre – effectively achieving a form of defeat in detail through their ability to concentrate overwhelming fire – is a model. It was not an accidental achievement.

Not all this flexibility survived into the machine age navy. The emphasis on strict obedience and formation manoeuvring in the early steam fleets had good combat reasons and was little different to the age of sail, but the radio created wholly new problems of naval command, problems which were not solved in the First World War. In the navy of Nelson and in the early steam age, once out of sight of the admiral, you acted in accordance with your general instructions, but you were effectively on your own. This reflected an essentially bi-polar culture of naval command that had developed over many years, something with which the protagonists were comfortable. “Mission command” was integral to naval operations long before the term was invented on land.

The problem was that the advent of radio created a “virtual unreality” in the minds of junior commanders. Because they could communicate, officers thought that they were in communication with their admiral, but they were not. From the first days of radio and throughout the First World War, there was a tendency for subordinates to assume that their operational commanders knew something that they did not and to either fail to take action, or blindly follow an order on this basis. It was the missed opportunities of the Battle of Jutland which caused Admiral Jellicoe, who bears some blame for

not trying harder to fix this problem beforehand, to cry “Never think that the C-in-C sees what you see.”

The navy also had to learn how to give orders remotely. It is significant how critical army observers of the 1912 and 1913 British naval manoeuvres were of the way in which the various fleets were managed. Their strictures were well merited. Most interestingly, they remarked also of the navy’s failure to exploit the radio to provide sit reps (situational reports) to dispersed forces.

What is true is that navies had generally achieved a good balance by the Second World War. Commanders on the spot were usually allowed to get on with their job and were provided the information they needed to do so. There were exceptions to prove the rule – the British Admiralty’s mistaken scattering of the ships of convoy PQ17 to Russia in the belief that an attack by the battleship Tirpitz was imminent was perhaps the most egregious example, but that this was a fundamental command error, in this case on the part of the First Sea Lord, Admiral Sir Dudley Pound, was recognised at the time. Perhaps as much by Pound as anyone.

Air forces did pretty well, too. This is despite air commanders facing similar problems of remote command to the navy, exacerbated by the fact that they could not fly on operations – although many up to one- and two-star level did so covertly, even if not approved to do so. One reason was that star rank officers were usually combat veterans of the First World War, and understood many of the stresses of going in harm’s way. Even if the technology had evolved so far from their time, since young aviators always think any flier over the age of 30 is a “has been”, the technological gap was not much of a problem in senior officers’ interaction with the aircrew.

Thinking about Difference

The nature of command – and of the systems through which it is exercised – changes according to the operational environment. So does the definition of what constitutes staff duties. Much of what the army considers to be staff duties are managed in the navy and air force in completely different ways – often by unit navigators, engineers, and logistics officers. Water is generally a problem of transport for the army; it is more often a problem of engineering for the navy. It isn’t something that the air force really needs to think about at all once the air crew have their water bottles filled. Many of the dissonances between the services result from a failure to understand such differences. A Joint commander needs to take constant account of them.

Intervention from the Top - and Dealing with the Top

History says something about what is usually considered a present-day issue, that of the thousand-mile screwdriver. The truth is that commanders, indeed politicians leading governments, have always intervened when they felt that they had identified the critical point and where they believed that they possessed a better understanding of the issues and what needed to be done than the local commander

The truth is that commanders, indeed politicians leading governments, have always intervened when they felt that they had identified the critical point and where they believed that they possessed a better understanding of the issues and what needed to be done than the local commander.

Marlborough, Napoleon and Wellington all did it personally on the battlefield if necessary; more recent leaders by methods more appropriate to their own situations. The tensions between the U.S. Government – in other words, President Lincoln - and the commanders of the U.S. armies in the Civil

War are a fascinating insight into civil-military relations in a democratic society under pressure. Nearly a century later, President Truman fired General MacArthur very much because a situation had evolved in which the U.S. Government (and the Joint Chiefs) had a fundamentally different – and much more global and coherent – view of the way ahead than the Theatre Commander.

It is true that it is sometimes very difficult to make judgements about the quality of command performance when there are fundamental problems with the strategic situation and national intent within which a campaign or campaigns are being waged. Both Vietnam and the Gulf War provide examples when it can be argued that commanders at the higher levels failed to some degree. But there is no easy answer for a commander working for a democratically elected government which appears to be going down the wrong grand strategic path. At what point does one shut up and sailor, soldier, air or – now – spaceman? Is some form of refusal of duty acceptable? Refusal is essential if you are being asked to do something immoral or illegal – but what about a policy or an action you consider unwise? There is no firm answer to an inherently situational and subjective problem. But commanders will be much better prepared to meet such challenges if they have studied the dilemmas of the past.

Turning back to the subject of control – and the great land commanders already mentioned exemplified it (as did Nelson, Cunningham and Nimitz to name three great naval leaders) – successful commanders also know when to withdraw from their focus on a vital point and resume their contemplation of the full picture of the operations of their command. The point is that the really difficult judgement to make – and it remains difficult – is whether the information available to the higher commander actually does give a more accurate picture, and whether the use to which the higher commander puts that information and the

way in which it is employed is appropriate within the context of the commander's overall mission.

The People Commanded

Because of the need to work within a system, even while modifying it, a key aspect of command is the management of subordinates. The ability to balance reality and to compromise is one that is always required, perhaps most clearly in a coalition environment at the highest levels. At what point compromise exacts too heavy a price is always moot. The debates as to whether Eisenhower should have been less accepting of Montgomery's tantrums and deficiencies (as well as those of some of the American generals) in north-western Europe after D-Day will continue as long as people study history. But command is not just direction, it always includes elements of cajoling, encouraging and just "living with it". Or in cases like Eisenhower's, living with people you'd rather not, as well as the mistakes that they make.

Nevertheless, one of the key requirements of command is that of making changes in people – when to fire and when to retain. Twelve O'clock High is an important guide, even if fictional, since it bears very directly upon the issue of people being worn down by the strain – and it was written by veterans of the campaign concerned. The British Army during the Second World War may have been too ready to relieve commanders in the field, but that this was probably a better approach than the contemporary naval tendency to allow people to run on too long. And the ruthlessness involved was relieved, notably in the British Army's case, by the recognition that the inadequacy of performance which required such a relief was often due to fatigue and that the officer concerned could return to operational command later. British Field Marshal Michael Carver's autobiography *Out of Step* gives insights into how this worked, particularly in 1944-

45 when he was an armoured brigade commander in north-western Europe. On the other hand, the Royal Air Force's "lack of moral fibre" approach was, however understandable, not the best way to go about managing people under intense pressure, particularly as it largely removed the possibility of the aircrew involved returning to operations at a later date.

This is a key contemporary issue, one exacerbated by the unremitting nature of modern communications. It is only the scale and nature of operations over the last decade which have disguised its extent and its potential seriousness. It is uncertain how long commanders at every level will be able to operate and remain effective in a modern high intensity conflict.

Self-Awareness in the Commander

Another point concerns self-awareness and the need for it. Sublime self-confidence, the sort of thing that marked Douglas MacArthur, amongst others, has its value, but, exacerbated by the modern 24-hour news cycle and the accompanying 24-hour politico-strategic cycle, commanders need to be very sensitive to the quality of their own performance and how well they are bearing the strain. This does not necessarily mean that a commander should "fall on their sword" if they have made an error. This may have to happen, depending upon the nature of the mistake, but there are also mistakes made by the best intentioned. Commanders should be in post because, when all is said and done, they are the best person for the job and they need to be completely honest with themselves – which may include acknowledging that no one else can do their job better than themselves. That said, there may come a point when someone else can do the job better. Operational fatigue may be the most frequent cause for departure, but it may also be that the nature of the job and the circumstances have changed – this

was behind General Wavell's ready acceptance of his relief as the British land commander in the Middle East in 1941. Wavell himself probably recognised that his laconic style, perhaps even more than his strategic outlook, was so out of kilter with Prime Minister Churchill, his political master that the relationship just could not work. This, it must be stressed, is not about the moral and ethical differences mentioned earlier, but recognition that personal dynamics just might not be able to work.

Finding Out

Another facet of command is the art – a term here deliberately used – of working out what is really happening. In part, being able to do this is dependent upon existing professional mastery. The Duke of Wellington was famous for his ability to predict what the lie [sic] of the land was on the other side of the hill – even if he had never been there. This was the result of a conscious determination over many years to train himself in this ability. The historian Thomas Carlyle once wrote that genius is, first of all, the transcendent capacity for taking trouble and this is a good example. There obviously needs to be inherent talent, just as there does for a musician. But

Another facet of command is the art - a term here deliberately used - of working out what is really happening. In part, being able to do this is dependent upon existing of professional mastery.

talent, however great, does not excuse the musician from thousands of hours of practice. This is one of the points that Clausewitz is making when he speaks of the requirement for genius in a commander – which in part derives from extensive and rigorous personal preparation for and study of war in history. It leads to the ability to seize the moment – what is sometimes termed the coup d'oeil, the ability to spot an opportunity, decide immediately what to do and

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then do it. The naval expression for this is “seizing the Golden Moment”. However, there is a difference between the “blow of the eye” and opportunism. Commanders need to guard against the latter. If German military culture had an abiding fault, it was opportunism, perhaps the besetting sin of Rommel in particular.

In any event, it is interesting to assess the evolution of “finding out” mechanisms, something that have become progressively more important as the scale of command has increased. Perhaps scarred by his experience of gaps of understanding between front line and senior command in the First War, Montgomery developed a system of liaison officers who he despatched to all points of the compass to find out what was going on and report back to him.

The ability to sort the wheat from the chaff in inevitably exaggerated claims of operational success – such as the numbers of enemy aircraft shot down or the accuracy and effect of bombs on target – is a particularly important talent for those waging war in the air. The successful air commanders of 1939 to 1945 all had their own systems for getting at the truth of what was happening – systems which did not always adhere to the formal “chain of command”, a term sometimes used by those who confuse the transmission of information with the necessary formal hierarchy of direction.

The Challenges of Information Technology

A fundamental problem for command in the present day is that so many of the computerised systems derive from Second World War concepts of air defence [sic] and maritime operations. They are thus inherently platform focused and their utility for command purposes declines as one moves closer to the national strategic level. They are much better for showing a point in time than they are for indicating

trends. Navies and air forces, rather more than armies, need to guard against the assumption that a dynamic battlespace picture is enough.

In terms of modern information technology, perhaps one of the key skills that is needed – and this is not confined to commanders, let alone senior officers – is an ability to assess the quality of information in order to place the appropriate weight on it as a support to decision making. One could term this “Google wisdom” – as any user of the internet should know, the first few entries in any listing provided by a search engine are not necessarily the ones which should be relied upon. Such an ability to judge applies to much more than just the internet (and, to be fair to many more than just the military). But the more information available and the more sources from which it derives, the more important this becomes, and this is an area in which the demands on commanders are continuing to intensify.

A key ability of effective commanders is to remain clear headed and remain focused on just what needs to be achieved. It is possible to do well at one level of war as a commander and badly at others. Napoleon’s military achievements in 1813 were vastly more impressive than his ham-fisted political performance, in which he allowed his bargaining position to deteriorate steadily even as he fought a remarkable series of rear-guard actions against the Austro-Prussian-Russian coalition.

It is also true that some people perform best at particular command levels. Inevitably, there is a tendency for commanders to be promoted until they reach their level of incompetence. Armies have tended to have more flexibility than the other services in pushing people back a level if they haven’t performed in their new domain. But it must be understood that some individuals may be competent enough in more junior command positions but will only shine at the highest levels. This is not quite the same thing

as Lord Acton's aphorism that the individuals at the top of any profession tend to be those who did not possess the qualities to detain them at its lower levels, but there are differences between the required qualities of commanders at each level of warfare.

Finally, in real world operations in which I was involved, one of the greatest command challenges that I faced was to explain to my people just how messy reality is, to indicate that my confidence as a commander did not equate to some infallible prescience about the future and to comfort them as best I could – generally with aphorisms such as “If you can't take a joke, you shouldn't have joined”. But, more to the case, I pointed them to other periods of uncertainty and confusion, with historical examples, of how people at all levels of warfare have always had to deal with and adjust to the unknown – and sometimes got their initial responses very wrong. In short, I have tried to make it clear that they had better start thinking about their own situation. Let me add that I found amongst my juniors a definite correlation between having a background in history – which can and does include self-education rather than formal academic study -- and being at ease with ambiguity and complexity.

The Challenge of Command in the Cyber Century

I would like to conclude with a challenge to those who are thinking about command in the present day.

The navy's “virtual unreality” problem of World War I has already been described. The West's military as a whole may be in a similar situation of “virtual unreality” in 2020, resulting in cultural problems which affect command both down and up the chain. Ironically, the malaise may be greatest not among those at the top, but in the middle and at the bottom. Subordinates often complain about the syndrome of the “thousand-mile screwdriver”, but there is another aspect than its abuse by micro-managing

seniors. Juniors can be, and often are corrupted by a communications system which allows them to clear every decision with their boss. Furthermore, they can be so corrupted without ever becoming aware of it. The implications of this for a conflict in which the protagonists are engaging in cyber as well as kinetic warfare should be obvious, particularly when combined with a military culture that has developed a “zero defects” mentality, wholly unforgiving of error. If many are in a state in which they would rather ask permission than seek forgiveness, it will not end well.

The question, perhaps the most important question of command in the 21st century, is how can leaders be developed who will not, when the situation demands, wait to ask permission, but instead will seize the initiative and abide the consequences?

To help answer this and the other professional challenges, commanders – and prospective commanders – must study and reflect on history. Not just of their own service, nor of their own nation, nor only of conflict, but of the human experience in detail and as a whole. They must read widely and think deeply. Only this way can they achieve what Clausewitz terms as “genius”.



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