

# Letters

## Finding time for Fun

Reviewed by Air Commodore Alistair Monkman

Some years ago, I as a TGRF Sqn Cdr - along with all my contemporaries - attended a Strike Command Conference to discuss and debate the issues of the day as seen from our collective perspective. Whilst the agenda quickly homed in on the usual suspects: operations, risk, resources, structures etc, after a few hours, most in the room were broadly aware that the debate had become somewhat overly clinical, conceptual and business orientated and was ignoring the moral component which is so intrinsic to our military way of life. In a courageous attempt to redress the balance and place morale back on the agenda, one brave soul stuck up his hand and ventured the proposition that what was increasingly missing was, quite simply, the fun element. Succinctly put, our people were becoming tired, parochial and overly task orientated and, as a consequence, needed some form of recurring 'decompression' to reset the work/life balance and add back that 'sparkle' into their lives.

The top down response was swift and chillingly negative, postulating that we were far too busy to consider having fun, that fun and an operational focus in a climate of scarce resources were mutually exclusive and that such frivolities were not the business of serious commanders. Indeed, 'having

fun' was an irrelevant distraction that we could - and should - be above, and our people similarly do without. Moreover, any attempt to engage in 'fun' was a quasi-fraudulent abuse of our resources and above all a diversion from our core responsibilities as frontline commanders.

Now, I may be being slightly unfair in my recollection of events but I do clearly recall the electric shock of disagreement - followed by the smoulderingly visceral undercurrent of opinion that we were 'on the wrong track' - which followed this very visible 'shooting down' of an attempt to put fun into its proper perspective. Fortunately, things have changed dramatically over the last few years and Commanders at all levels are now charged with achieving an appropriate balance; we have overseen a veritable explosion in Force Development initiatives and a powerful resurgence of sport, AT and people-broadening learning activities.

This is as it should be - but I sense that we have still not yet fully justified precisely why this is so important and why we must factor fun into decision-making at all levels. The need to have fun is an emotionally charged and seemingly obvious and intuitively human response to the stresses and strains of busy lives but it needs a degree of objective

analysis if it is to secure its strategic foothold in our vision of who we are and what we stand for. Otherwise, there is a very real danger that as technology allows us to work ever harder (witness the 24/7 'on call' Blackberry wielding executive as the modern commercial role model), and as we become ever more connected to external organisations with enormous capacities - and demands - for ever more comprehensive and multi-disciplinary engagement (UN, USAF, EU etc) then - in a 'time is money' world, fun will yet again be relegated to an unfunded aspiration against which we can take increasing risk. Where 'fun' sits amongst our many priorities is a debate we have yet to fully bottom out (and now may not be the time) but from my perspective as a recent stn cdr, 'fun' certainly sits on a par with 'quality' and it spoke to all the issues in my in-tray: change, building capacity, recruitment, retention and engagement. Therefore, I hope that this brief foray into fun fuels a wider and more informed debate.

I believe that the propensity to have fun - to 'work hard and play hard' - is a defining element of our military credo. This has always been so but is of particular significance today as we struggle to recruit from a limited labour market beset with competitors offering more money for less risk or disturbance. It is certainly one of the core - almost a defining - attributes governing how we are perceived by society at large. And this really shouldn't come as a big surprise: we are all positively selected from the gene pool of potential recruits for, amongst other factors, a willingness to engage broadly (mentally and physically), to

respond to and enjoy opportunities for travel and 'adventure' and to seek out excitement, risk and personal challenge. Thus we are identified, conditioned and then stimulated in such a way as to need and respond positively to fun (or so my doctor wife informs me...)! Even a cursory check of our military mantras reveals how much fun is a fundamental part of what we believe in. How many times have we heard quoted, at all levels, such truisms as 'nobody likes to work for a miserable so and so' or 'I'll keep on going in the Service until it stops being fun'.

But what is fun and how can we measure it? Fun is an intrinsic part of what we do and was acknowledged as one of my Stn's 3 priorities along with support to operations and training/personal development. It should be as much about how we do our business as what we do. It is not only retention positive, it is vital to our people's welfare and well being, particularly during a period of high operational tempo. Without turning this into a pseudo-scientific treatise, I volunteer that fun might be viewed as having 3 different but related elements. Firstly there are those activities we individually enjoy and which put a smile on our faces. Clearly these are personality and contextually dependent but whether playing golf, in pantomime, paint-balling or pig-sticking, all act to re-charge and re-energise mind and body alike, and most are social activities which are best enjoyed in the company of like-minded individuals. Secondly, work itself can be fun if the vision is well articulated, the task is achievable, the infrastructure and tools fit for purpose, people perceive themselves

to be well led and suitably rewarded and a culture of learning, devolved responsibility and innovation is carefully fostered. If the second element is nurtured and supported, then people will pass the acid test and look forward to going to work on Monday - even after a weekend of having fun with the family! Thirdly, there is that element of fun which is derived from exposure to novel and often demanding circumstances. It derives from the euphoria experienced after expanding our own personal envelope, successfully tackling difficult issues or achieving results in the face of complexity, ambiguity, uncertainty or danger. Here lies the sense of having 'grown'; we all tend to enjoy what we are good at but we often find even more satisfaction in discovering a new talent or overcoming an old weakness. All 3 elements of fun appear to me to have certain characteristics in common. Fun will always be bespoke to the situation and personalities involved - but it does have enduring themes. There is a real human need for fun: it is an essential trace element of life and not simply a desirable HR input. Its successful injection is immediately apparent, offering instant improvement, benefits and feedback. It is also incredibly infectious and, as a vital force multiplier, it speaks to the core of what really motivates people, both as individuals and within teams. It overcomes prejudices, enlarges perspectives, enables people to go the extra mile and is an extremely powerful bonding/ team building agent. Short term gains aside, it must have longer term beneficial effects in terms of stress relief, building resilience, aiding

recuperation and, from my personal experience of watching our war-damaged people, it can definitely assist in any healing process. Akin to morale, just because it isn't there doesn't mean it is not needed, and people will search elsewhere for fun if the Service fails to provide the required format and dosage. Most people find fun in sports and hobbies and it is interesting to note how, whilst our Stn's Clubs are for the most part still thriving, they are often populated by our more mature personnel. How many of us have bemoaned the younger generations apparent fixation on 36" LCD TVs and unwillingness to participate in Station clubs - only to be equally astounded as to how well they perform under stress on exercises and operations. Their need for fun is as strong as ever but we may not be offering the appropriate outlets. I have a gut but unquantifiable hunch that our younger Servicemen and women are increasingly turning away from seeing the Service as a source of relevant fun and are looking elsewhere to fuel their needs.

So where does that leave us as leaders keen to avoid being labelled as the 'fun police' by those we seek to engage! Well, the first point is to recognise that there is a huge demand for fun within our Service. It has been perceived by those we lead, until recently, to be a seriously neglected area - especially amongst those who have been around long enough to witness the erosion of previously acceptable levels of fun as our numbers have declined, working practices leaned and increased operational demands taking its toll. Secondly we cannot take a gamble on ignoring the need for fun; we

can take calculated risks (cognisant of the relevant opportunity costs and consequences) - much as we do for stocks or flying hours - but, like training, standards and practices, if we ignore the need for fun, we do so at our peril. Thirdly there is a perception that the RAF, in embracing technology and business practices to the degree we have, is becoming relatively more 'fun un-friendly' than our sister Services. Fourthly, the solution lies, not in defining processes and procedures - nor via pamphlets, scorecards or in designing Station 'fun-o-meters' - but in discretely setting the conditions for success and giving fun the priority it needs. Fun needs to be subtly re-authorised as an appropriate military activity and viewed as an acceptable norm rather than a frivolous activity undertaken by those with spare time on their hands. This will entail allocating a percentage of our overall effort and energy into fun-related activities - we will need to apportion time for fun if we are to counter the common perception that fun and work are part of a zero sum calculation in which work is afforded the status of an ever-increasing constant.

Finding time for fun will make our people more agile, fitter and better motivated. Fun is a critical strength and weakness of our tactical centre of gravity at the Force Commander level: the morale of our personnel. Beyond that, it has the power to strategically influence and/or shock the system through manning levels and recruitment and retention rates if not taken seriously. As a basic human need, fun is directly proportional to activity levels: the harder you work, the more critical becomes the requirement for fun.

Although it appears that it can be deferred in times of high op tempo, we must ensure that we appropriately 'down-gear' on return from ops to enable its resumption.

Ultimately, having fun is as much a fundamental part of the moral component of war fighting as effective leadership, morale, training and education. Fun bonds, energises and enables our people - and our current ability (or inability?) to recognise its worth and shape its engagement will be, ultimately, one of the determining factors in securing the future success and existence of our Service. We do not own the monopoly on fun and many other organisations are actively plagiarising those very elements of fun which once made the military such an attractive employment opportunity. It would be unutterably tragic if our once greatest asset assisted our nemesis.

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