

Article

The 'Eeles Memorandum': A Timeless Study of Professional Military Education

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Abstract: Examinations of historical examples are an important element of the professional military education debate and demonstrate the enduring nature of some of the necessary considerations. Air Commodore Henry Eeles, the Commandant of Royal Air Force (RAF) College Cranwell between August 1952 and April 1956 wrote a prescient report in 1955. The military, political and social changes that were occurring have some parallels to the contemporary context, including expectations about access to higher education and the introduction of new technology, which was viewed as leading to an era of so-called 'push button warfare'. Eeles was also cognisant of issues such as balance, time and life-long learning that are just as pertinent today as in 1955. The context and content of the report has ensured that it has enduring relevance for the RAF.

Disclaimer: The views expressed are those of the authors concerned, not necessarily the MOD.

Introduction

The professional military education (PME) debate is as contentious as it is valuable. While there is general acceptance of the importance of PME, there is a multiplicity of views over its content, delivery, length and purpose, amongst other factors. Dr David Morgan-Owen has written, consequently, that PME is approaching a 'fork in the road'.¹ A view has emerged that PME requires a 'fix' of some variety, but there is little agreement on what it should constitute, not least because of the divergence of perspectives on the nature of the 'problem'.² The risk is that in seeking a fix to the perceived current and future issues in PME, the past gets ignored entirely.

Some excellent work has been conducted on the history of PME, but there is still a dearth of studies, particularly in relation to air power.³ Air Marshal Edward Stringer, noted an important paradox in reflections on the conceptual component when he stated in 2018:

There is an irony in making a case that air forces have not, traditionally, expended as much effort thinking about the conceptual component of combat power as they have on ensuring a robust replenishment of the physical component or bolstering the moral one. Because no one can accuse the early pioneers of lacking visionary zeal.⁴

That 'visionary zeal' was evident in 1920 at the foundation of RAF College Cranwell, where a diverse curriculum of arts, science and vocational subjects was taught by Cambridge and Oxford graduates as the Chief of the Air Staff, then Air Marshal Hugh Trenchard, 'sought to ensure that the RAF Cadet College should be founded on the best principles of education and instruction'.⁵

As practitioners and scholars mine the works of military thinkers in search of contemporary relevance, a widening of the aperture could promote a new understanding of historical views on military education. A particularly prescient report on education at RAF College Cranwell was written by the Commandant, Air Commodore Henry Eeles, on 6 June 1955.⁶ Air Commodore Eeles, an experienced officer who had commanded 263 Squadron during the Battle of Britain, was Commandant between August 1952 and April 1956. Eeles demonstrated during that time that, in addition to a wealth of professional experience, he had a far-reaching and progressive approach to the conceptual component.

The centenary of RAF College Cranwell (2020), provides an opportunity to shed light on the important, but often overlooked, thinking about military education that has been undertaken at the College. In considering the merits of twenty-first century practitioners reviewing the experiences of the early twentieth century, Squadron Leader Paul Baroni assessed: 'The fluidity, blistering pace of technological advancement and constant change of today echoes this period, with strategic instability, conflict, financial, political and social turbulence the characterising features between 1900 and 1945. Against such a backdrop, perhaps the only consistent factor for the military is our Conceptual edge.'⁷ Although perhaps

not as tumultuous, significant military, political and social changes were occurring when Eeles was writing in the 1950s, ranging from expectations about access to higher education to the development of precision-guided missiles. Equally, issues such as balance, time and life-long learning are just as pertinent today as they were in 1955. The context and content of Eeles' memorandum has ensured, ultimately, that it has enduring relevance for the RAF.

A Time of Great Change

That history does not 'repeat' itself, but does 'rhyme' is a well-known maxim. Parallels can be drawn between the situation facing the RAF in the 1950s and in the contemporary period. Eeles wrote at a time of increasing responsibility for the RAF, reflecting:

The recent White Papers on Defence have shown clearly the gradual change that is being brought about in the direction and balance of our defence effort, still greater emphasis being placed on the Royal Air Force. The delivery to the Service of atomic missiles has started and the power of the Royal Air Force is therefore increasing both relatively and absolutely, the Service facing a period of bewildering and unprecedented change.⁸

The introduction of atomic weapons, as well as guided missiles, was perceived as a step-change for the RAF. Although the balance of power changed in terms of the UK's nuclear deterrent, new responsibilities of great significance have continued to emerge for the RAF. Most notably, the UK's military space capabilities are 'primarily coordinated and delivered by the Royal Air Force and Joint Forces Command'.⁹ In a similar vein to Eeles' prediction about nuclear weapons, Dr Bleddyn Bowen has posited that 'resources and prestige may accrue to space power in the RAF's second century'.¹⁰ The RAF will, inevitably, also have key roles in 'defending military platforms and capabilities, but also in integrating cyber effects into operations'.¹¹ Eeles' clarion call that the RAF needed officers that 'have the mentality and who have been trained sufficiently to enable them to continue building during the next 20 years on the foundations laid at the College' to tackle the challenges presented by technological change is as true today as it was in 1955.

The pertinence of the aphorism that history 'rhymes' was further demonstrated in Eeles' views on automation and the introduction of precision-guided munitions. He cautioned: 'In 20 years time the progressive introduction of guided missiles of all kinds may have reduced the importance of the pilot, but in the era of push button warfare it will still be men who push the buttons and ability, leadership and character will be required as much then as now.'¹² This view ran contrary to the opinions expressed by some that the introduction of precision-guided munitions would reduce, or even eliminate, the human factor. Eeles' view may have seemed conservative and traditionalist, but, in hindsight, he may have even understated the continual relevance of the human factor.

The introduction of Remotely Piloted Aircraft Systems (RPAS) could be seen as the ultimate manifestation of 'push button warfare', but it has not undermined the human element.

Professor Derek Gregory has pointed out that 'characterizations of the drone missions as moments in a "video game war" that inculcates a "Playstation mentality to killing" may well be wide of the mark'.¹³ Indeed, Professor Peter Lee has argued: 'Despite the technical developments that enable the Reaper (RPAS) to be operated across continents, war and air operations remain essentially human activities.' He has noted that 'the distance-intimacy paradox of remote air warfare' raises 'emotional, psychological and moral complexities'.¹⁴ As Eeles looked to the future, he warned: 'It is not enough for a cadet to have a system of beliefs as it were imposed from outside. What is required is a deep-seated pattern of behaviour corresponding to his own beliefs and convictions. Integrity, moral courage and firmness of purpose are likely to be required in the future to a greater degree than ever before.'¹⁵ The nuances of contemporary operations, the implications of modern technology and changing societal attitudes will ensure that humans are as important, if not more so, than ever.

Balancing Training and Education

Eeles, while recognising the inherent value of training and the need to inculcate cadets in their profession, was a strong advocate of enhancing the educational component: 'The chief obstacle...in designing a syllabus is that of how best to satisfy the utilitarian requirements of the professional subjects while at the same time providing a course of study which is educational in a more liberal and far reaching sense'.¹⁶ Eeles was not unique in pushing for a more liberal education. General Dwight Eisenhower, for example, emphasised in 1946: 'No one could emerge from the experience of the last war without a most profound respect for the contribution to victory made by men trained in the liberal arts. The work of natural scientists in the development of new equipment is known to everyone. Less well-known, but of great importance have been the contributions of other arts and sciences.'¹⁷

A rigorous flying programme, which was acknowledged as 'physically stimulating', was not considered to be 'conductive to the spiritual and mental development which forms the basis of education'. Eeles proposed consequently: 'If the College is to meet this responsibility to the individual cadet then it must be ordered so that the educative process produces the maximum development of which each cadet is capable.'¹⁸ Balancing and deconflicting – in terms of creating adequate time when cadets would have sufficient energy to study effectively – was viewed as a fundamental challenge. That balance, in both formal and informal PME, remains an ongoing issue. In 2017, then Brigadier Mick Ryan, Australian Army, proposed: 'All members of a military institution must balance the vocational (or training) elements of their profession with development of their intellectual capacity. Even the most junior soldiers must continue to hone their intellectual capacity.'¹⁹ Vocational training will never lose its importance, but intellectual development is becoming ever more significant.

Eeles also recognised that the benefits of education would only be realised if sufficient time was provided for evaluation and reflection: 'Necessarily he [the cadet] is taught a large number of subjects. In addition, he learns to fly, and he is instructed in ground defence, in officer-like

qualities, customs of the Service and so on. The only place where these various influences can be integrated is in the cadet himself.²⁰ Modern literature on PME is replete with the view that reflection time is fundamental to development. Stated simply: 'Critical thinking is learned behaviour that must be accompanied with adequate reflection time.'²¹ Creating time for reflection and, subsequently, ensuring that it is used effectively, is an ongoing necessity in all formal PME around the world.

The Long-term Benefits of Education

Eeles' views were shaped by his beliefs about the likely long-term demands on officers joining the RAF. In addition to the likelihood that 'the power at his disposal and the consequences of his decisions will give him great responsibilities', Eeles was concerned that: 'The commanders of the future will have university trained technical advisers and it would be prudent to ensure that some Cranwell cadets who have the latent ability, should have undergone the same sort of educational experience.'²² Major General Christopher Elliot, British Army (ret), writing sixty years later, expressed a similar concern when reflecting on the British experiences in Afghanistan and Iraq: 'all the Chiefs of Defence in the decade 2000-10 had escaped the formal intellectual training and broadening experience that a university offers – particularly a grounding in conceptual skills – yet they were dealing with their peers in Whitehall almost all of whom had been to university.'²³ Subject specialisms and educational levels will never be universal, but the possession of similar qualifications to peers helps to create a level playing field.

Eeles was also acutely aware that there was an increasing expectation of access to higher education amongst potential Cranwell recruits. There was an innate pragmatism to encouraging cadets to pursue degrees as it would serve as a driver for recruitment. A 2018 publication, *Leading Change in Military Organizations*, outlined that there is a need to 'balance external stakeholder demands or expectations with enacting necessary change in the organization's best interest.'²⁴ Encouraging educational development was a fortunate marriage of external expectations and the RAF's best-interests in terms of both enhancing recruitment and improving effectiveness.

Eeles, at the same time as proposing that cadets of sufficient ability should have the opportunity to obtain degrees, was very much a believer that education was a lifelong process. Eeles reasoned that 'a cadet must learn how to learn, where to look for information, how to write, how to think, to reason and to express himself; how to apply himself to new ideas, how to organise his time and effort', which he viewed as 'the principles on which to build his future career.'²⁵ The absence of adequate time to learn, research and write has long been bemoaned and Eeles' view has been echoed in the twenty-first century. Major General Robert Scales, US Army (ret), for example, asserted: 'War is a thinking man's game and only those who take the time to study war are likely to fight it competently. Soldiers and Marines need time for reflection, time to learn, teach, research and write. In this new age of warfare we must do more to prepare soldiers to think as well as act.'²⁶

Eeles recognised that 'education is a continuous process and it may be argued that the cadet will develop after he leaves Cranwell, and it is certainly true that the College should not attempt to teach a cadet "all that he will need to know in the next 20 years"', but he also warned that 'the argument that a cadet will educate himself in the Service must not be pushed too far'. Eeles believed that it was Cranwell's responsibility to develop the skills necessary for officers to learn and that the building blocks for their professional development, which would take place in the wider service, should be furnished at the College.²⁷

Conclusion: Thinking about Historical Thinking

Although the specifics are different, when Air Chief Marshal Sir Andrew Pulford, the then Chief of the Air Staff, stated at the launch of 'Thinking to Win' in 2015: 'harnessing the output from "new" environments, preserving the quality of one's human capital and nurturing their creativity to promote rapid organisational adaptation, are the elements that can make the difference for air power', the concepts aligned, in broad principle, with the ideas of Eeles.²⁸ The fact that Eeles' views are not well known can be explained easily as they were contained in an internal memorandum. However, that reasoning may be too simplistic and points to a contemporary lesson. Eeles' ideas have enduring relevance and deserve a wider audience, but they also serve as a timely reminder of the benefits of a robust public debate. While accusations of air forces under-valuing the conceptual component are becoming increasingly prevalent, there needs to be more reflection on the existence of 'visionary zeal'. The challenge is to provide and support the necessary platforms to promote innovative thinking about the conceptual component of fighting power.

In a provocative *War on the Rocks* article, former RAF Wing Commander Mal Craghill recently made a strong case for enhancing thinking in the RAF and giving greater prominence to the conceptual component of fighting power.²⁹ Throughout its history, recognised air power thinkers in the RAF have been relatively scarce, and whilst many have lamented their absence, it perhaps reflects on the culture of a Service that has arguably been principally preoccupied by aeroplanes and 'kit'. While more air power visionaries would undoubtedly be beneficial, a first step in the right direction would be to contemporarily recognise and, retrospectively acknowledge, the few thought-leaders in the RAF that have advanced its conceptual component. Eeles' operational experience in the Second World War may stand out in his varied career and is, undoubtedly, worthy of great respect. Less prominent, but no less important, his forward-leaning and enduring attitude to education and, the conceptual component more generally, ensured that his time as Commandant at RAF College Cranwell was invaluable. It may be necessary to shift the paradigm when it comes to defining air power thinkers. Theorists that have addressed the delivery of air power have tended to predominate, but those that evaluate its conceptual and intellectual underpinnings are equally as deserving of recognition.

What betrays the age of Eeles' memorandum is not the substantive content about air power or the conceptual component, but the gender specific language that was representative of a time when there were only male cadets at the college. Eeles' views on a broad curriculum, adequate time, the need for reflection, access to higher education and the inherent centrality of human factors in warfare are just as relevant today. The past does not hold all of the answers for PME, but there is value in addressing historical ideas when thinking about current and future requirements.

Notes

¹ David Morgan-Owen, 'Approaching a Fork in the Road: Professional Education and Military Learning', *War on the Rocks*, 25 July 2018, <https://warontherocks.com/2018/07/approaching-a-fork-in-the-road-professional-education-and-military-learning/>, (accessed 14 October 2019).

² See, for example: Gary Schaub, Jr., 'A PME Survivor on how to Fix the War College System: Take it Back to the Future', *Foreign Policy*, 23 May 2012, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2012/05/23/a-pme-survivor-on-how-to-fix-the-war-college-system-take-it-back-to-the-future/>, (accessed 14 October); Lieutenant Colonel Jack Dempsey, 'To Fix PME, Decide Whether you are Training or Educating Officers – and do it!', *Foreign Policy*, 4 June 2012, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2012/06/04/to-fix-pme-decide-whether-you-are-training-or-educating-officers-and-do-it/>, (accessed 14 October).

³ See, for example: Gregory C. Kennedy and Keith Neilson (eds.), *Military Education: Past, Present, and Future* (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2002); Douglas E. Delaney, Robert C. Engen and Meghan Fitzpatrick (eds.), *Military Education and the British Empire, 1815–1949* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2018).

⁴ Air Marshal Edward Stringer, 'Lord Trenchard Memorial Lecture 2018', RUSI, 4 September 2018, <https://rusi.org/event/lord-trenchard-memorial-lecture-2018>, (accessed 14 October 2019).

⁵ E.B. Haslam, *The History of Royal Air Force Cranwell* (London: HMSO, 1982), pp. 21-24.

⁶ The National Archives of the UK (TNA), AIR 20/9083, Air Commodore H. Eeles, Commandant, Royal Air Force College, Cranwell, 'Memorandum on the R.A.F. Scholarship Syllabus', 6 June 1955 [hereafter: Eeles, 'Memorandum'].

⁷ Squadron Leader Paul Baroni, 'Foreword', *Air Power Review*, 18:1 (Spring 2015), pp. 4-5.

⁸ Eeles, 'Memorandum'.

⁹ Development, Concepts and Doctrine Centre, *Joint Doctrine Publication 0-30: UK Air and Space Power* (Shrivenham: UK Ministry of Defence, 2017), p. 71. Note: Joint Forces Command became Strategic Command (UKStratCom) on 09 December 2019.

¹⁰ Bledwyn E. Bowen, 'The RAF and Space Doctrine: A Second Century and a Second Space Age', *The RUSI Journal*, 163:3 (2018), p. 63.

¹¹ Wing Commander Paul Withers, 'Integrating Cyber with Air Power in the Second Century of the Royal Air Force', *Air & Space Power Review*, 21:3 (Autumn/Winter 2018), p. 133.

¹² Eeles, 'Memorandum'. The document refers to boys and men specifically as female entrants did not arrive at the college until 1970.

¹³ Derek Gregory, 'From a View to a Kill: Drones and Late Modern War', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 28:7-8 (2011), p. 197.

¹⁴ Peter Lee, 'The Distance Paradox: Reaper, the Human Dimension of Remote Warfare, and Future Challenges for the RAF', *Air & Space Power Review*, 21:3 (Autumn/Winter 2018), p. 125. For more on the human dimension of RPAS, see: Peter Lee, *Reaper Force: Inside Britain's Drone Wars* (London: John Blake Books, 2018).

¹⁵ Eeles, 'Memorandum'.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Dwight D. Eisenhower, Chester W. Nimitz and A.A. Vandegrift, 'Liberal Education in the Military Forces', *The Journal of General Education*, 1:1 (October 1946), p. 34.

¹⁸ Eeles, 'Memorandum'.

¹⁹ Mick Ryan, 'The Art of Leading Unit-based Professional Military Education', *Modern War Institute*, 29 March 2017, <https://mwi.usma.edu/art-leading-unit-based-professional-military-education/> (accessed 15 October 2019).

²⁰ Eeles, 'Memorandum'.

²¹ Lieutenant Colonel Paul Berg, 'The Importance of Teaching Followership in Professional Military Education', *Military Review* (September-October 2014), p. 68.

²² Eeles, 'Memorandum'.

²³ Christopher L. Elliott, *High Command: British Military Leadership in the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p.201.

²⁴ Tom Galvin, *Leading Change in Military Organizations: Primer for Senior Leaders* (Carlisle: US Army War College Press, 2018), p. 8.

²⁵ Eeles, 'Memorandum'.

²⁶ Quoted in Peter Foot, 'Military Education and the Transformation of the Canadian Forces', *Canadian Military Journal* (Spring 2006), p. 17.

²⁷ Eeles, 'Memorandum'.

²⁸ Air Chief Marshal Sir Andrew Pulford, 'Thinking to Win', Speech by the Chief of the Air Staff Air Chief Marshal Sir Andrew Pulford, 17 September 2015, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/thinking-to-win>, (accessed 13 October 2019).

²⁹ Mal Craghill, 'Thinking About Thinking in the Royal Air Force', *War on the Rocks*, 1 March 2019, <https://warontherocks.com/2019/03/thinking-about-thinking-in-the-royal-air-force/> (accessed 13 October 2019).

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