

# THE GORDON SHEPHARD MEMORIAL PRIZE ESSAY, 1977

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## THE MILITARY MAN AS LEADER AND MANAGER

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### The Problem

The military man belongs to a profession which, with one well-known exception, can lay claim to the longest history. Although all the older professions have been influenced by modern technology, the profession of arms has been affected more than most. Not only has technology given us new tools of the trade but it has brought warfare to a scale and complexity that has changed the whole philosophy of the use of armed force. The human and military cost of modern war has compelled political leaders to adopt postures of deterrence rather than belligerence, of caution rather than bravura. For the military man himself the change is no less radical: the battle for which he prepares is of a speed, complexity and devastating effect undreamt of by his predecessors. He must use products of high technology efficiently without losing sight of the military purpose for which they have been provided. This in itself is difficult enough, but there is another factor which dominates his thinking – the great cost of maintaining modern armed forces and of training them to a high state of readiness.

Thus, when the pressures and problems of new technology combine with the stringencies of a low-growth economy, the challenge to the military man becomes a very serious one. Defence in the late-1970s is subject to such a challenging conjunction, and we in the profession of arms must look carefully to decide how to combine (or at least reconcile) in the individual the different qualities required of the cost-effective manager of high-technology systems, and of the leader of men in combat. The key starting point is that we may have to reconcile or compromise; there is no virtue or realism in simply calling for supermen who enshrine both sets of qualities in full measure. Therefore this essay will review the qualities required of the military officer as a manager and as a leader, to see to what extent they can be combined in the individual. It will then discuss how the Service should seek to combine them where it is possible and adjust itself to face the situation where it is not.

### The Manager

First then, what do we require of the modern serving officer as a manager? In the course of a peacetime career he may be concerned with the management of technical systems in many ways, but we can identify three broad categories: in the day-to-day application of established systems to their operational role; in the specialist control of a particular system Command- or Service-wide; and in the research and development leading to new systems. Broadly, these management tasks are those imposed on the officer while he is serving respectively on a station, in a Command HQ or MOD staff, and in the Operational Requirements or Procurement Executive staffs.

In the first case our manager works under the most detailed and diverse constraints. Depending on the particular job these may include permissible flying rates, crew and operator limitations, technical limitations of equipment, establishment scales, pressures for quantified reduction in the consumption of fuel or other material, and many factors beyond his control: bad weather, no-notice exercises, power strikes, visitors, general service commitments and others. He must know about all these constraints, work out clearly in his mind what freedom of action remains to him, and then operate within these limits with the panache and application expected of him as an officer. His skill as a manager lies firstly in being able to work out the effect of the constraints on his repertoire of possible courses of action; secondly in setting objective criteria and finding which is the best course of action; and thirdly in executing the plan in the real work of men and materials. The first process is always necessary, even if it is sometimes done subconsciously. The second process is relevant when some objective has to be achieved as cheaply, quickly, or efficiently as possible – nearly always the case. For both these steps the manager needs the skill to manipulate data where appropriate and to the limit of their accuracy, and the ability to make intelligent estimates of unknown factors. To take a simple example: presented with a proposed task and with certain resources to meet it, our manager will first do a sum to see if the total effort available is at least equal to the task. If not he must change course, but assuming this first test is passed he can look at the problem in closer detail, and consider which schedules of work within the fixed total give the most effective and convenient pattern of work for his men, making reasonable allowance for contingencies and diversions. Next he must select from the possible options the one which meets the objective in the cheapest, quickest or otherwise most efficient way. He must then choose a strategy for implementing his plan, in full consultation with those involved. He must monitor performance and compare it quantitatively with the required objective, as it is brought into effect. In this common situation, then, our manager needs to be numerate and able to analyse problems in an increasing level of detail. He must be able to consult, explain, monitor and correct as the plan unfolds. His skills therefore are at once analytical, numerate, human and practical.

The same is generally true in the second type of management situation – as a staff officer. When controlling radio sets or logistic plans or aircraft deployments he is likely to be faced with more detailed numerical calculations, for which he may need to use a computer. Perhaps he will draw solace (if not help) from all those ‘number-crunching’ exercises he did while at Staff College. However, his role is that of an intelligent layman; he must be able to understand the broad possibilities and limitations of the work done by the civilian scientists, but he is not usually expected to contribute greatly to it in technical detail. His distinctive and essential contribution is to provide the element of service experience which will make the project at once realistic and in the end useful in the operational situation. He must bring the sobering facts of practical military reality to the sometimes heady atmosphere of scientific speculation; he must bring to practical fruition the new systems for the Service which he has helped conceive, plan, and develop.

As a manager, then, our Serviceman must be technically up-to-date in the broad area of the systems with which he is dealing; be able to analyse a wide range of situations using whatever numerical methods are relevant; and be able to do the sums for himself up to a non-specialised level of detail. By using numbers where appropriate a manager can convince without having to persuade, and so reduce the area of a problem for which debate and discussion, with their attendant uncertainties, are the only methods of solution. Further, he must be able to analyse an operational task to its essentials, using relevant practical experience, and be able to convey the result to the scientists and engineers concerned with developing new projects.

## **The Leader**

Looking at our officer from a different viewpoint, what do we require of him as a leader? In some jobs, frankly little that the management textbooks do not discuss under the heading of human relations or man-management. The debates about the essence of leadership will continue for as long as there is a profession of arms, but we must recognise that many aspects of leadership are not the exclusive preserve of the military and that some civilian situations (for example industrial relations) may demand greater powers of leadership than the peacetime military situation. Nevertheless, in military operations an officer preserves an unarguably different role from his civilian counterpart. He must inspire, persuade, or cajole men to make a sacrifice for what they must be convinced is a higher good; a sacrifice which may be of unremitting application to some Herculean task to the point of exhaustion, or of physical or mental pain to the point where life itself is poured out. This, in the final analysis, sets the leader on a different plane from the manager. No matter how many other qualities they may have in common, this vital spark in the leader is quite different from even the most human, sympathetic or understanding characteristic of the good manager. This spark is the authoritative essence of leadership, which those who have experienced it in action perceive with a clarity which confounds the theorising of armchair analysts and sceptics.

## **The Leader-Manager: A Challenge**

On the one hand we have a manager, portrayed as coolly analysing situations with the help of a pocket calculator, and on the other hand we have a leader whose distinctive feature is the ability to elicit a man's utmost efforts by reason, persuasion, or by sheer force of character. What we must now consider is the extent to which an officer can be both a leader and a manager.

But does this polarity of qualities represent a true picture? No, for we have seen that the distinctive qualities of the leader, as opposed to the good manager, are called upon only under the pressures of war or intense operations. This represents a small (though vital) part of the Serviceman's time. If the Services succeed in their aim of deterrence, so it will remain. Let us therefore recognise that sound management will prove adequate for the vast majority of Service problems and situations; let us continue to 'demythologise' the subject of leadership by the sort of objective look given by the functional approach; let us do that and see what small residue remains. That residue is the vital spark which we look for as 'officer qualities' in potential recruits. It is at that stage, before knowledge and experience mask the inward man, that we have most chance of recognising it. Thus it is vital that we continue to pay the greatest attention to the selection process which looks at young people to seek that spark of leadership. When we have found it in the individual and admitted him to the Service let us largely forget about it, because it is a plant which on its own will grow; but if we keep on pulling it up to look at the roots it may well die in the kind of introspective questioning that is anathema to the vigour of a man of action.

Be clear that I am speaking only of the small vital spark of leadership in the strictest military sense. For the rest we must train as we do for a man's specialist skills – by deciding what we need him to do, in objective terms, and then training him to do that to the standard we need and no more. If we cease to view management problems and the majority of leadership problems as different things we will have a body of knowledge and experience to give our officers which is wider in its application, and more consistent, and with less mystique about it. With a rational and informed approach to the problems of most of his Service life, an officer is equipped with a sound base from which the vital spark of military leadership can operate on the relatively few occasions when it is required. We can teach him the principles of building up goodwill in times of peace and routine, of educating his men on the real reason for their job and their Service, of human relations, and man-management. In

short we can equip him with the springboard from which he can deal with the moment of crisis with the panache and single-minded drive which only he as a leader can provide.

### **The Response**

For the Service, then, the solution is in two parts: a new emphasis in training and doctrine, and a recognition that the spark of leadership may place some limitations on our managers. Training must be based on a fresh doctrine: that to elicit the best response from people in the work situation is a problem to be solved by reason, knowledge, and experience. Whether we call it leadership or management does not greatly matter, although to insist on the first term can only keep us out of the mainstream of civilian terminology and risk clouding these issues with abstract discussion. The important thing is to demythologise the subject and take advantage of the increasing body of knowledge which is now available to help the Service situation as much as the civilian one. 'Management studies' in this wider sense should then be an integral part of the training at all stages of the officer's career: initial, ISS, Staff College, and so on. 'Leadership', in our narrow sense, we have reduced to its minimum and intangible element; to attempt to teach this is to embark on an endless debate on the definition of abstract nouns, and to draw up lists of the qualities of a leader on which no-one can agree and which serve no practical use for the man compelled to learn them. Instead, teach it by example: the example of those in the Service and the examples from our military past. The first is part of Service life – the visible result of that spark we saw in men who entered the Service perhaps long ago. The second, the lessons of history, can be presented in the general context of military studies. We teach the history of the service, but let us take steps to include examples of individual heroism and courage from the annals of the Service. There are plenty, and their message stands out so clearly that to add comment is as unnecessary as it is impudent. To cultivate the spark of leadership in the young there is nothing like the 'glorious deeds of old'. They may not be relevant to the problems of the hangar or office next morning, but they will be the source of example and inspiration when the hour of crisis makes its relentless demands.

What does this training involve in detail? The training of an officer is a continuing process and the Service has long recognised the need, at regular intervals throughout his career, to consolidate and add to knowledge gained in practice. During formal courses it is relatively easy to introduce modern management studies, although the critical selection of material is of vital importance. The literature of management has its store of rhetoric as much as the literature to leadership, and we must take care to present material which is supported by case studies, direct observation, logical analysis or numerical techniques. Fortunately, the amount of such useful material is large. However, mere rote learning must not be encouraged. In the past our system of promotion and other exams has had dangers of this sort. Particularly in management studies an officer must himself relate what he is learning to his own experience. To be aware of developments in management science, to judge them in the light of experience and then to adopt and use the proven residue is much more useful than learning stock answers to exam questions. This approach must form the basis of our teaching of the subject in formal courses.

As to leadership, we have said that 'teaching' is the wrong word; it is more presentation of example. This too can find a place in training courses, but the more radical problem is to present it in the Service at large, because the example needs to be held up to all, not just to the leaders. We have means of reaching all our servicemen in their daily lives: posters tell them of the dangers of FOD and of not locking the security containers, and how long they can grow their hair. Regular lectures and films are now part of the security education programme. Why not use the same techniques to remind them of why they are in the Service, what it is all for, the real military and other problems it faces, the noble response which people have made and are still making to its success? The Russians are not noted for encouraging frivolous diversions for the military, but they have decided that it is

necessary to have regular reminders of these fundamentals for the men in the armed forces. Our approach would need to be a good deal more subtle than theirs, but the basic concept is a sound one.

The Service's second broad response to the problem of the leader-manager must be to accept that men with the essential spark of leadership may have some limitations as managers. We have said that our officers should be numerate and have technical expertise to a level below that of a civilian specialist. To take our officer beyond that is to risk stifling the spark which we have seen is so essential. There are too many examples of officers who in the short-term interests of the Service have been allowed, or required, to specialise to the detriment of their Service experience in the wider sense. Computing, training, specialist engineering fields, and long years on the staff can all afford examples of people who have lost the broader vision of the military life and task. And where there is no vision the people perish. The Service must not permit officers to have such a pattern of jobs no matter how convenient or interesting for the individual it may be. Such jobs should have a substantial civilian element to give continuity and to ensure that the Serviceman gets in practice as well as in theory the variety and stimulus that will keep him aware of the Service, its wider role and its everyday and human problems. How else can we fit him for service in the highest ranks?

This is a problem solved not just by a more rigorous policy of posting officers; it reflects back to the motivation of the individual himself. In our selection process we need to look for the man who wants to be primarily a military officer and only secondly a specialist in a particular field such as flying or engineering. Unless his career widens his military experience and thinking as well as his specialist experience and thinking we can hardly complain if his military perspective and motivation begin to atrophy. Thus to keep alive the spark of leadership which we insist he has when he joins we must accept that he cannot be employed as a long-term manager on a single project, as a technical expert in a specialised field, or even confined to a narrow range of military duties for many years.

General Sir John Hackett has said that the essential basis of the military life is the ordered application of force under an unlimited liability. No officer should be allowed to forget that his own special skill is only of use to the extent that it contributes to that ordered application of force, and that he and his men share both the obligations and the mutual bond of that unlimited liability.

### **In Sum**

We can sum up quite briefly. The profession of arms must accept and respond to the pressures of an age of technical complexity. We must exploit the growing body of knowledge about the quantitative, scientific management of resources and the sympathetic management of human beings in the work situation. Therefore we must broaden our concept of 'management studies' to embrace a much wider range of everyday Service problems, and remove some of the unnecessary mystique about their solution. We must then train our officers to be competent and numerate managers in this wide sense, but not employ them in a restrictive or over-specialised role.

We are left with the core of military leadership – what I have called the vital spark. This is what sets the leader apart, even though it is called into play only rarely. We must look for it – and insist on it – in the officer-recruit. We must then cultivate it, not by trying to teach the intangible in abstract words, but by presenting examples of the devotion to duty, courage, and valour we see in the peacetime Royal Air Force and have seen in its distinguished past.

For most of the people most of the time the vital spark of military leadership has little relevance: but to equip the few for the demands of war and crisis we ignore it at our peril.