

CULTURE

REFLECTIONS ON COMMAND

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ABSTRACT

I was privileged to spend the last two years commanding the 3rd Combat Engineer Regiment, and I loved every minute of it. Apart from the enjoyment of being a brigade soldier again, and the pleasure of regimental life, the exercise of command is an intellectually engaging pursuit. There was rarely much complexity in the decision-making, but with a wide sphere of influence, responsibility for a large number of people, and the need to nurture every aspect of the regiment for the long term, it was a thought provoking time. Having experienced this personal journey, I thought it may be of interest to share some of my thoughts and observations, primarily addressed to future unit commanders.¹ This article firstly proposes that a fundamental command role is to uphold the psychological contract between Army and its people, and suggests what such a contract might say if it was actually put in writing. The remainder of the article is a series of discrete observations about the practice of command. My aim is to assist others, perhaps giving them a head start on the journey, and setting them up for their own new and further insights.

CUSTODIAN OF THE PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTRACT

The psychological contract between the Army and its people is not written down anywhere, but it is deeply felt and it profoundly affects morale and commitment. I believe it has the following ten fundamental tenets:

1. The Army will train you well, pay you well, give you lots of benefits, maintain your health and fitness, and generally look after you and your family in every possible way. In return we will work you hard, take you away for long periods, force you to move around the country, and possibly one day order you to go out and kill or be killed in combat.
2. The Army exists to serve the interests of the Australian people, as expressed by the elected government of the day. War and the employment of military force are dreadful events, and should be avoided wherever possible. However, due to human nature, there will always be a need for good people to have force available to uphold justice, peaceful security and national interests.
3. The decision to employ force is strictly not a military one. In an imperfect world of difficult decisions and strategic uncertainty, the process of democracy is the best available. Military leaders will provide frank and fearless advice, but the decision to employ force is made by government. Soldiers have to accept this. Our decision to keep serving contains an implicit commitment to do whatever is asked, without any discretion to opt out of a specific operation. Mistakes will inevitably be made, but military force will not knowingly be employed in an ill-considered or ethically unsound manner.²
No matter what the rights and wrongs of a particular campaign are perceived to be, the soldiers are doing their rightful duty and will be supported regardless.³
4. The chain of command exists to accomplish the Army's missions. This is the enduring first priority. The term 'people first' is over-simplistic: you can't truly put 'people first' and exist to fight wars. People are the means to an end, albeit the most important means and highly valued. The chain of command will make hard-headed decisions to get the job done, while also exerting itself to look after people in a selfless manner. This is why we have Anzac Day, Remembrance Day, Welcome Home Parades, memorial services and all the rest: these events pay homage to the fact that Service people place their individual needs behind those of their country, their mission and their mates.
5. If you become a casualty in the line of duty, then you have made a sacrifice on behalf of every Australian. If you are injured then you will get the best medical treatment and the Army will try to keep you in uniform for as long as practicable. The reality is that your career prospects may change and eventually it may be impractical for you to keep serving.⁴ If this happens then you will be given every possible support to transition to a new career, plus sufficient monetary compensation to make up for any disabilities and loss of Army potential. If you are killed

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in action then your death will be mourned by the Australian government, the ADF and the wider population, your accomplishments will be recognised; and your family will be supported, including financial compensation for the loss of your future income.

6. In this day and age, conflict is localised and often occurs far from home. Most of society gets on with its comfortable and prosperous existence, unaffected by war, relying on a small military force to uphold security and bear the brunt of doing so. This fact is recognised and appreciated. Combat forces people to make decisions and take actions that are inconceivable in normal life. The normal imperfections and mistakes of human existence occur in war, but with much more significant consequences. Soldiers are Teddy Roosevelt's 'Men in the Arena',⁵ and few non-combatants are entitled to sit in judgement of what they did and how they did it.⁶
7. The Army is not a cut-throat, competitive organisation where you only advance by undermining others. There is an equitable and transparent system. If you work hard, uphold your values, have faith and let the system do its part, then the right things will happen. Not everyone gets to be a general or serve overseas, but such is life. Grace and realism are the keys to happiness; success is a false god.
8. You do not need to fight for your rights or conditions of service. That is the role of the chain of command and other advocates. Stay out of it, have confidence in those that represent you, and don't tarnish the Army's reputation by being seen as self-serving.⁷
9. Effectively, the people of Australia entrust military personnel with a license to kill. This is not enacted until and unless we are deployed and given Rules of Engagement. Such responsibility is not given lightly, and is predicated on assumptions about our decision-making, self-discipline and humanity. This is why such high behavioural standards are demanded of us in peacetime. We are set apart from societal norms in many ways, and rightly so.
10. Army life is fun and adventurous. Our job includes travel, camaraderie, personal challenge, exposure to other cultures and exhilarating experiences. A lot of what we do does not look like 'work'. This is part of the deal. While the chain of command does need to manage risk and corporate responsibilities, the enjoyment and flair must be maintained.

This psychological contract results in Army careers that fit into a narrow envelope of ethical, practical and spiritual balances. It can be highly rewarding and generates profound commitment. The ten tenets are perhaps idealistic, and we have all

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experienced breaches of contract (generally by the principal), yet they are very real. A profound and spiritual role of commanders is to uphold this contract on behalf of all their people. Not easy, and generally these are the issues you will need to fight for. In the words of a previous formation commander, ‘commanders need to spend a lot of time overturning the [expletive deleted] decisions of staff officers’. Expect to spend some time on this and be challenged by hard decisions. Also, your people will need you to provide leadership and understanding—keep the psychological contract in mind when you write your Anzac Day address, plus every other time something difficult happens and you need to speak to the unit and help them make sense of it. This is leadership at its most profound, and will be highly influential on unit morale.

INSIGHTS FROM THE JOURNEY OF COMMAND

PHILOSOPHISING

It has become the norm for COs to write their own command philosophy. This is a good thing. It promotes reflection by the CO-elect in the lead-up to assuming command, then provides a useful point of reference for him and his team throughout his time in command. It is a highly individual document, and should be personally handcrafted. It can seem a little vain, but the reality is that the unit commander’s personal values and approach do quickly influence the whole unit. It is therefore appropriate and useful to promulgate it in written form. I found it helpful when faced with difficult decisions: my own command philosophy provided the values-based context and I sometimes just needed to remind myself of that baseline. Similarly, it helps with Mission Command; often people would seek guidance on things, and I could point them towards my command philosophy rather than answer the question directly. After a while they were better able to act independently with confidence. On some occasions people used my own command philosophy to convince me of a particular course of action. Fair enough, and that’s a good example of management upwards.

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MISSION COMMAND

The most rewarding leadership experience is seeing subordinates achieve wonderful things on their own initiative, feeling pleasantly surprised by the methods employed, happily watching events unfold knowing that you set the conditions for

success, yet with a light touch and in a way that your subordinates largely feel they have done it on their own. We don't always achieve this, despite espousing Mission Command. Why is this? I think it is because of a lack of self-discipline and investment by commanders. All too often, people claim to be Mission Commanders in the belief that staying out of the subordinates' way is a virtue in its own right. This is simplistic and lazy. What tends to happen is that the subordinate gets poor initial guidance ('I'm busy and it will do him good to work it out for himself, and I can assess him better this way'), then cracks on manfully until things stray from the commander's (belatedly considered) intent. By then it's too late for a light touch and the commander re-injects himself to get things back on track, employing tight control and leaving all parties disgruntled. It is all very well to let people learn from their mistakes, but in reality it is wasteful to make a habit of this: while one leader executes his flawed plan, his subordinates are learning bad lessons, getting frustrated and expending scarce resources. Better to let the lesson be learned 'virtually', via the back brief process, then reinforce success via execution of a good plan. I think that the respective roles of commander and subordinate commander in good Mission Command can be visualised as illustrated in Figure 1.

The key features of this approach are as follows:

- Creation of a sound 'command climate', in which people know each other well at a personal level, trust each other, and have a confident sense of how each other would react to unforeseen events. This takes time and effort. Examples include social interaction, training to shared doctrine, lessons learned sessions, debriefs and a forgiving approach to well-intentioned mistakes. It is helpful to

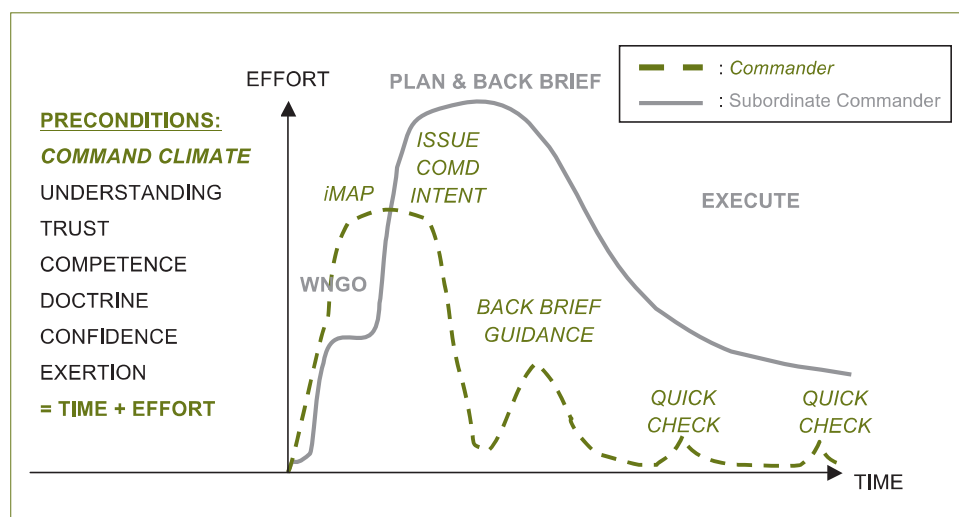


Figure 1.

use Mission Command effectiveness as the base criteria for counselling, whether positive or negative. For example, ‘That was a great initiative and I am glad you got on with it while I was away, this is why I am happy to employ Mission Command with you,’ or ‘What you just did was outside my intent, as clearly expressed to you in the Orders Group and further discussed in the back brief. I am finding it hard to work with you using Mission Command because you keep doing things like this. I will therefore tighten the reins until we can regenerate the right command climate. If that doesn’t happen then I will sack you.’

- Early investment by the commander in direction setting. Take the time to think through the problem, allocate the right resources then express his intent well. A written commander’s intent works superbly. This is surprisingly rare. Our culture seems to accept that busy commanders can shoot from the hip—a false time economy and an abrogation of responsibility.
- A good back brief by the subordinate commander. This provides essential clarity, the opportunity to adjust resource allocations, and most importantly a strong sense of confidence. If the subordinate commander’s plan is seriously flawed, then this is the time for the commander to decide whether to allow him to go ahead anyway and learn valuable lessons, or tease out the plan and allow the same lessons to be learned in discussion to develop a better plan for execution. It is easy to leave a subordinate alone to get on with it once he has provided a good back brief. A quick series of ‘what-if’ discussions during the back brief would also deeply reinforce the Mission Command environment.
- Occasional visits from the commander. The first visit provides an azimuth check and an opportunity for the higher headquarters to troubleshoot in support of the team. All going well, the second visit should simply be an opportunity to recognise success, and the third visit to confirm the end game and provide a warning order for the next task.
- Self-assessment by the commander. If issues arise during a subordinate’s execution of a task, then the commander should ask *himself* where he failed: poor command climate, poorly expressed intent, insufficient attention to the back brief, failure to allocate appropriate resources, or incorrect choice to employ Mission Command with an ill-suited subordinate? Only after doing so, should he then consider what went wrong at the lower level.

Mission Command is *not* a condition of service. It is an enjoyable and highly effective leadership approach, but it requires hard work and in particular an early investment of time by the commander.

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MAKING THE HARD CALLS

One striking feature of command is the sheer volume of decisions needing to be made, often with a time imperative. As noted above, few of these are particularly complex. The trick is to siphon off those decisions that need further attention, and otherwise power ahead. 'Best is the enemy of good enough' in many cases, and most things arrive on the commander's desk after passing through a chain of well-informed and diligent subject matter experts. A few thoughts follow on dealing with the difficult ones:

- The 'muscle memory' of twenty years' service provides great intuition. Make the leap of faith in your own judgement, and be confident that the chain of command will back your decisions. Our system has many checks and balances, so fear of the occasional mistake shouldn't slow you down.
- Trust your 'Spidey-Sense'. As a CO your situational awareness becomes well developed, and often it takes very little to trigger your sense of disquiet. Follow your instincts, and ask a few probing questions if something doesn't seem right. Often a light tap on the tiller will save real problems later.
- The truth sets you free. Making tough decisions, being candid and being direct are all command responsibilities. Such actions continually reinforce your position and the confidence of your team. Integrity is built slowly. Conversely, a part of something important dies forever with every weak decision or mealy-mouthed explanation.
- Statement of Reasons. If an outcome is likely to be controversial or goes against others' recommendations, then simply providing a rationale with your decision is very effective. A lot of effort spent on redress action is wasted and could be avoided. If you have the habit of providing a Statement of Reasons with your decisions then people appreciate your effort, respect your candour and generally accept the outcome. Often it is a good mentoring experience for junior leaders too, helping them understand issues they had missed. Command comes at a time of life when you have been through several maturation cycles, and are likely to be pretty comfortable in your own skin. Your independent judgement and confidence have steadied, and you may well find that most of your subordinate officers are not yet at the same point. Your mentoring role is therefore important, and you have a lot to offer.
- Benign neglect. If an issue is vexed and the way ahead unclear, yet resolution is not urgent, then often the wisest approach is to stay defilade and await further developments. People sometimes push you for decisions that really don't need to be made.

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- Don't get too close to your own position. If you are consulting with your staff about something, then don't give away your own inclination too early in the decision process. You may stifle a necessary debate, or simply gain ill-founded positive reinforcement from your staff. Make them work, and force them to plant their own flags. This is a much more rigorous approach to decision-making. Also you sometimes need people to work things out for themselves, especially tough decisions. Of course, you may also save yourself from being seen to be wrong, if the free-flowing debate actually sways you from your initial and private assessment.
- 'Nothing in war is ever as good or as bad as the first reports of excited men would have it.' You will sometimes be presented with tales of woe and imminent disaster by your OCs and other key staff. Keep your powder dry. Often the initial prognosis is exaggerated, and the crisis never eventuates. The experience gap between a CO and his (generally) young majors is sometimes quite poignant. That said, I suspect that formation commanders may occasionally feel the same way about their unit commanders.
- Commanders must command, followers must follow. Make your decision and expect people to salute the flag and get on with it. A lot of people are rather precious about this. I found this quite striking when our formation was under pressure in a complex (exercise) environment.⁸ Commanders tend to grow up making hard decisions among competing priorities, accepting risk, mitigating it as much as possible, then moving forward. The ability to do this well is a defining characteristic. I believe this is a growth area for all of us, and a good mentoring focus for COs with their officers. I think that in general the Defence environment is a lot less hard-headed than it should be, based on the perspective I gained from working several times in private industry.
- None of us is perfect: you will make mistakes and fail occasionally to show enough strength of character. If you have a shocker then dust yourself off, be honest with yourself and others, then get back on the horse. Your humanity will reassure others.

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THE UNFORGIVING MINUTE

How to get Rudyard Kipling's 'sixty seconds' worth of distance run' from every minute?⁹ Somehow all that automation and labour-saving equipment has only added to our workload, and most of us are over-stretched all the time. In the case of ADF units, the demands of operational tempo and corporate governance are

nearing extreme levels. Arguably, time management is one of the great challenges of our era. A good leader needs to focus hard on key activities yet spread his influence widely, and to manage diligently yet lead strategically. He needs to be accessible to his people but also to remain objective and interconnected with the external environment. The best leaders achieve a balanced existence, including cultural interests beyond work, happy family relationships and friendships, and time to themselves for rest and reflection. People respect a leader who manages his time well, and who projects an aura of calmness and ease. I found time management to be a particularly strong pre-occupation while in command, both personally and as a leadership issue. There are some good books about this, but the key points are as follows:

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1. Be self-disciplined and own your own time.
2. Be as systematic as possible.
3. Ruthlessly distinguish between 'urgent' and 'important'.
4. Jealously guard the time you need for strategic planning and direction-setting.
5. Allocate plenty of time to visiting unit activities and mentoring your people.
6. Look after yourself and your own family.
7. Fill the gaps with the remainder, accepting that you can't do everything.¹⁰

This is tough to achieve. I am certain that if I did nothing but sit at my desk for two years, I would have been fully occupied responding to emails and administrative paperwork. This would not be a good approach for the CO of a Combat Support unit in a high readiness formation. Email is a killer, but has to be managed somehow. The following time management protocols proved useful:

- No meetings or phone calls before 0900 or after 1600, thereby leaving people alone at the most productive (or family-oriented) times of day.
- Only check emails and do admin three times a day at specified periods, and don't assume people will have read emails outside these timeframes—use the phone if something urgent arises. Switch off distracting email alerts, send cc: emails to a separate (rarely-checked) folder and get on with real work.
- Develop a robust battle rhythm with your team. In barracks, base everyone's time management around MS Outlook, with shared calendars and a strong culture of diarising your own activities and respecting the plans of others.
- Email discipline: write emails that clearly specify actions and responsibilities, do not use 'cc:' unnecessarily; use 'bcc:' only for genuine privacy reasons; get off the email and on the phone if a topic becomes controversial; empty your inbox daily.

- Get written work done early or late in the day, when you are at your most productive and creative best, then allocate useable chunks of time to getting out and about, conducting battle procedure or planning ahead.
- Programming time for family activities is good leadership (e.g. taking kids to school occasionally, lunch with partner, personal admin—all clearly visible in your shared diary).
- Avoid and disguise after-hours work wherever possible (e.g. don't send emails on a Sunday, save them as drafts to send on Monday): it's subtle but this has a strong effect on work/life culture.
- Operational contingencies or urgent personnel welfare issues over-rule all the above.

These proved worthy targets, hard to achieve, but immensely helpful at wresting back control of time and well worth continual striving. If all else fails (and it often does), then pick One Big Thing to achieve with your day, and run with that.

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THE POLITICS OF INFLUENCE

A CO should be active in influencing the environment in which his unit operates. This is a significant aspect of a commander's role, and a valuable service to the people he leads. This responsibility includes operational planning, organising training, career management, resource allocation, capability development and welfare. In addition to all his internal responsibilities, a CO should allocate a fair bit of time to knowing and influencing the wider environment. One confronting experience as a CO is to be unable to solve problems, especially when your subordinates look to you for exactly that purpose. The ability to wield influence therefore becomes very important. My observations on this were as follows:

- Meet the market. In military terms, this means 'ensure you understand and act in accordance with higher intent'. To an entrepreneur it means 'work out what the market wants then give it to them'. You may be ahead of the market's own understanding of what it needs, in which case you must lead them to it. This is true entrepreneurship, and very lucrative. Similarly, for a military officer, it is being a good change agent, innovator and upward-manager. Couch your recommendations in terms that draw this linkage: senior leaders appreciate advice from someone who has obviously taken the trouble to understand their pre-occupations. It is hard for someone to refuse you if you trace an irrefutable logic path between their own guidance and your proposal.
- Market well. Being right is not enough. To be convincing, you need to market your ideas. This is achieved by being personally credible and providing actionable

advice in the right timeframe. Invest time and effort into being seen as a trustworthy individual and building goodwill capital. Phrase your recommendations carefully, and harness whatever consensus you already have in order to go the extra step. Sometimes planting a seed then leaving it alone for a while gives people time to get used to a confronting proposition. Look for an early victory to create faith and willing, then work your way to the more controversial issues.

- Be positive. Assume the best of people, reinforce the good in them and work around their limitations. This approach verges on the naïve, and you will occasionally be caught out, but in my experience it works as a self-fulfilling prophesy.
- Leave no room for doubt or plausible deniability. People are generally a lot less direct and clear in their advice than they think they are, or should be. State your position clearly, including a specific recommendation. Look people in the eye when you do it and put your advice in writing if you need to add weight (and traceability). If you are firm in your views yet face resistance, then respectfully make it clear that you do not agree with the decision. Decision-makers have to manage competing priorities, one of which will be you, but don't make it artificially easy for them. This is a surprisingly powerful way to wield an iron fist in a velvet glove, as long as you use it with discretion and wisdom. If things go astray later, then saying 'I told you so' is generally toxic and of little help to anyone. A significant look, a raised eyebrow and nobly refraining from saying it is actually far more influential.
- Don't take 'no' for an answer. Sometimes you just need to be capricious and insist on getting your way. I am talking about dealing with people outside your own organisation, in circumstances where authority relationships are ill-defined. You are a CO, your position carries a lot of weight, and Army people are hard-wired to obey you. When you invoke this you have effectively relieved others of their accountability, so they will generally salute the flag and give you what you want without fuss. Now it's on your shoulders and it had better work out well, which is all you wanted in the first place.
- Be a trusted specialist adviser, not a single issue zealot (SIZ). How to know the difference? You are a SIZ if your advice takes into account only what you know, and you believe it is the decision-maker's job to consider other factors. Another good indication of SIZ status is that you go to briefings and provide big updates on small topics. A trusted adviser will provide good advice within

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his lane, but will also do his best to understand the competing priorities faced by the decision-maker, and make reference to these in his recommendations. Commanders deeply appreciate advisers who ‘get’ this.

- One in the eye is worth two in the ear. PowerPoint® is much-maligned, but if used well it remains a very powerful way to express complex ideas convincingly. A good written brief is convincing, but may not have the access and impact needed for results. Much better to adopt a two-pronged approach, using a verbal brief as well. The converse is also true: a verbal brief has little enduring effect, no matter how well-received. Convince in person, and then document a tangible outcome. For example, provide a written brief with space for the approval authority to handwrite a few comments then sign, and get it done on the spot. Better still if you get the decision-maker’s staff on side beforehand. It is generally easy to get time in senior leaders’ diaries, especially if you treat their personal staff with respect and establish a good relationship early.
- Timing is everything. No senior leader likes to be seen to change their mind. If you sense that something critical is heading in the wrong direction, then work out when the decision will be made and exert yourself to shape it before the commander plants his flag. The leverage of counter-arguments increases dramatically when face becomes an issue. Another issue of timing is careful selection of when you become decisively engaged on something: if your initial advances meet resistance then often it is best to quickly pop smoke, regroup and find a new axis of advance for later. Sometimes sending a subordinate recon party forward is better still, leaving you uncommitted and able to shift your axis or retreat.
- Sometimes it is better to lose graciously. You won’t win every time, and certainly you should pick your targets and *generally* only fight the battles you can win. However, you will inevitably lose one occasionally. If you take it well, and react wisely, then you will plant a seed of gratitude and (possibly) debt that will bear fruit later, potentially on a more important issue. Enough said.

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THE BOSS

It is surprising how little a CO sees of his formation commander, much less than an OC sees of his CO for example. COs have a lot of autonomy and formation commanders are extremely busy people. As a general rule, your formation commander will expect you to get on with business and be responsible for your own decisions, and will be grateful to be left in peace most of the time. Some

good advice provided by a former brigade commander is to batch process—if you haven't spoken with your boss for a while (say, two weeks) then gather up a list of things to catch up on, and arrange a time at his convenience for a telephone chat. You will soon work out what he wants and needs to know about or be consulted on, and how. It is also good for the command climate to keep in occasional contact like this. It is best to avoid badgering him by email (especially unnecessary cc:), and if you want an issue resolved then prepare a short written brief. It will be appreciated if you make a point of always acknowledging directives, and provide feedback as appropriate (e.g. 'we will achieve this by ...', 'the impact on my unit will be ...', 'this is unachievable because ...').

Just like you, your boss can't fix everything for his formation. Recognise the limits of his power and don't pressure him on things he can't change. Being 'balanced and flexible' is a realistic posture in many instances. Expressing your frustration upwards won't help, other than as self-indulgent venting, and showing your frustration to subordinates makes the situation worse for them.

Command at all levels is sometimes lonely, perhaps more so at formation level than in the regimental environment. Therefore, don't be afraid to provide positive feedback upwards when warranted. We tend to shy away from this, for fear of being seen as currying favour, but the boss has got his heart in the job as much as you have, and when something goes well it is good to celebrate it. That said, your boss doesn't need to know how clever you are; most of your own initiatives and successes should stay within the unit.

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THE RSM

You and the RSM really command the regiment together. It looks as if you do it, but really it is a partnership. Provided that the RSM is good, this is reassuring to the soldiers—they know that their way of thinking and their interests are represented. Your RSM is a discreet sounding board for you, a frank and fearless adviser, and a technical expert in things you have long forgotten or never knew. He is also a good companion for you, and certainly the closest and most important relationship you will form as a CO. You will have a grasp of the big picture and a long term, strategic way of thinking, while he will ensure you remain connected with the human beings that make it all happen. The RSM also allows you to remain officer-like and dignified when shouting and gesticulating are needed.

YOUR OWN HEADQUARTERS

Your unit headquarters represents you and is a direct reflection of your professionalism and attitude. It is easy for a headquarters to create a bad impression, which extends to you personally as the CO. It looks very bad if you are prepared to tolerate poor standards close to you. Ensure your headquarters is beyond reproach in its field craft, battle rhythm and personal standards in barracks. First impressions are important in creating faith and confidence in your more tangible outputs. For example, think about the impression you want to make when holding Orders Groups and meetings, and make your staff work hard to achieve it. Headquarters culture has a strong impact, especially when your unit is widely dispersed with many tasks and limited communications. It is easy for a headquarters to become a controlling and fault-correcting entity, but much better to be demonstrably there to assist the sub-units. Take every opportunity to troubleshoot, and bite down hard on any martinets in your team. It is gratifying to see how well the headquarters team responds when they know you take their performance personally.

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YOUR SUB-UNIT COMMANDERS

Your exercise of command continues through to squadron/company, troop/platoon and section level. Sometimes it pays to remind yourself of this and take specific steps to reinforce it. You may find that between your own headquarters staff and your interactions with other headquarters, your sub-unit commanders can be left a little on the outer. They are the key leaders and should be prominent as such. For the most part, leaving them to get on with things is appreciated by all parties, but try to build a sense of command camaraderie. The mentoring role of a CO for his OCs is one of the most important and rewarding aspects of command. Over my time in command I had five lions and a lioness as my squadron commanders, and they operated really well autonomously. Every so often though it was great to have a commanders' lunch or similar, without others around. Getting them plus their sergeants major together to form a commander's forum occasionally is a great way to make big decisions, as well as reinforcing the command team.

HYBRID VIGOUR¹¹

The Army is a fairly broad church these days. It contains people of diverse backgrounds, and with a variety of personal motivations. We now have lots of lateral transfers, reservists on full-time service, officers commissioned from the ranks,

re-enlistees back from civilian life, the number and seniority of women is increasing, and more women are appearing in traditionally male-dominated areas of the Service. I see this as providing useful diversity, and if anything we need more of it. The Army could do with more people of non-Anglo Saxon origin, more linguists, more individuals with a previous career, greater freedom to transfer in and out of uniform, and an officer corps with greater appreciation for artistic and cultural pursuits. If we were all stereotypical red-blooded Alpha-male Duntroon graduates, then we would be taking a narrow world view—not a good thing for adaptive campaigning on interagency operations. We need to appreciate diversity and embrace different perspectives, recognising that they will add value to our own.

PILOT'S ADVICE, CAPTAIN'S ORDERS¹²

Commanding Officers are provided with advice from many quarters, and it is not always correct or consistent. We need to be robust in maintaining independent judgement. This point is not always well understood. For example, it is easy to be seduced by legal *advice* in the mistaken belief that it is *direction*, and therefore definitive and inviolable. This is not the case. Bear in mind that the legal profession spends much of its time second-guessing its own 'judgements' through the appeals system. Legal advice is only based on a narrow field of view compared with the array of competing priorities faced by a commander. Listen to the advice, then make your own *decision*, and instruct the legal adviser to find a way to codify and protect your chosen course of action. The better lawyers get this and will be only too happy to help—you are the decision-maker and they are but one of the 'consultants' there to help you.

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Other 'consultants' out there include medical staff, psychologists/psychiatrists, logisticians, military police, padres, OH&S advisers, military risk managers, security specialists and practitioners of the Technical Regulatory Framework. The same principle applies—listen to the advice, treat the adviser with respect, make your own judgement, then require the specialist to use his expertise in support of *your* plan.

COMMAND DILIGENCE

Commanding Officers have a broad range of responsibilities, many of which can be considered corporate governance. It often feels as if the governance requirements are oppressive, outweighing and stymieing core business. Two thoughts on this:

1. Most governance requirements are actually about maintenance of combat power, analogous to the mindset required in theatre for a long campaign. The

phrase ‘tactics are for amateurs, logistics is for professionals’ expresses this. We have a lot of equipment, many people, and are the custodians of valuable taxpayer-funded resources. I dislike the term ‘corporate governance’, and use ‘command diligence’ instead as it better captures the true nature of the responsibility.

2. Notwithstanding this, the Army’s approach to corporate governance is not great, and needlessly increases the burden on commanders. Firstly, it is unrealistic to have some of the key responsibilities carried as extra-regimental roles for people with busy day jobs. In particular, OH&S should be a full-time role. For example, any large construction organisation will have at least one full-time safety officer. The OH&S statistics for civilian industries analogous to Defence are extraordinarily good, but we lag several orders of magnitude behind.¹³ You don’t change a culture, implement systems and supervise safety properly if it is not a full-time job. There is certainly scope to have one or two individuals per unit fully employed on key governance tasks—they could either be civilian staff or perhaps senior warrant officers (as long as they stay out of the RSM’s lane). Secondly, we have an abundance of disparate oversight agencies, each of which is entitled to conduct unit audits. The outcome is a constant stream of different audits, each of which requires preparation, in-brief, hosting, out-brief and follow-up. Far better for Army to centrally manage one bumper audit session per unit each year, then leave units to get on with it.

TIME SPENT ON TRAINING IS OFTEN WASTED

Regardless of the Strategic Reform Program, our training time and resources are precious, and good training builds people’s confidence in their leaders. A talk-crawl-walk-run approach is best, yet we often seem to be learning in the field, leaping far ahead of people’s understanding. Far better to educate people, practise and rehearse at a small scale, and only then attempt the real thing. We have all been trained in a great diversity of skills, and are therefore rusty at most of them. Start a training activity with classroom revision, followed by some sort of simulation (e.g. a war game or Rehearsal of Concept Drill using a mud model, or computer-based simulation, or simply working through it on a whiteboard), then conduct a small-scale rehearsal at slow tempo with instructors present, then finally do it for real. The results will be far better than business-as-usual, and will make considerably better use of scarce resources. Close training areas are a valuable asset for this.

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BAD THINGS HAPPEN IN GOOD BATTALIONS

I don't know who said this first, but I often had reason to think of it. When something goes wrong, don't take it personally or feel a need to manage it in-house in order to guard your reputation. Problems are a fact of life, and our responses say more about us than the problems themselves. The quick assessment is an excellent tool for this. There is considerable strategic sensitivity to any incident that may harm Army's reputation. Accept this, and just call things as you see them. The CO's comments on a quick assessment will make their way to high places via the Army Incident Management System. Decisive, well-considered and ethical action will be respected, even if the need arises from an embarrassing atrocity.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

Command is a wonderful life experience. Those who get this chance are very lucky. I know many fine officers who were at least as deserving yet did not get the opportunity. I often reflected on this, and sought to do well in their honour, as well as for the normal reasons.

It would be good to bottle the experience, then open the lid occasionally for the rest of my life and have a sniff. I sought to achieve this by maintaining a daily journal, and this has become a prized possession. Command is a philosophical journey, with many lessons learned and humbling experiences, as well as all the glamorous bits and the fun. Getting it down on paper is cathartic in the short term and fascinating in review.

As one of my peers said, command is pretty easy because you inherit a mantle of respect and authority, and (nearly) everyone in the unit just wants to help you succeed. It is humbling and confronting to see just how much respect is placed in the institution of a CO. With our feet of clay, it is hard to be everything that is expected of us, but we must try. The concept of love could be defined as 'caring deeply about someone, being fascinated by what they do, wanting to help them grow, accepting them as worthy despite their faults, and wanting to do everything possible for them without demanding reciprocation.' That is also a good definition of the mindset a CO should have towards his people, *en masse*. If a CO has strong principles, understands higher intent, is mission-focused, knows his trade and loves his people, then he will do well. I am deeply grateful to have had this opportunity, and I will always remember the magnificent people I was privileged to serve as their Commanding Officer.

ENDNOTES

- 1 I use the term ‘my thoughts’ somewhat loosely, including a few that germinated from seeds planted by others. These include Brigadier (Major General) Mick Krause (commanders’ role to remedy ill-considered staff decisions at superior headquarters, no need to advertise your own wonderfulness), Brigadier (Major General) Steve Day (interaction with formation commander), Brigadier Bill Grice (Retd) (truth sets you free, not getting too close to your own position, benign neglect), Brigadier Stuart Smith (remaining balanced and flexible), and Lieutenant Colonel Tim Bayliss (98 per cent of unit working hard to help the CO look good and succeed). I am also very grateful to the various peers, members of 3 CER and my family that reviewed drafts of this article and helped refine it.
- 2 I imagine that this tenet has given rise to much soul-searching in recent years among those of an independent-minded disposition. Australia’s strategic circumstances tend to bind us to decision-making by powerful allies.
- 3 Happily for modern soldiers, this is a particularly strong feature of Australian political and societal culture.
- 4 I assess that the ADF is still grappling with this as we adapt to current operations with ongoing casualties. Well-meaning pledges to provide wounded soldiers with a job for as long as they want one are not helpful to those individuals’ best interests or the Army’s needs.
- 5 As described by Teddy Roosevelt at the Sorbonne in Paris, 23 April 1910. The most famous excerpt of this speech is:

It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat.
- 6 This is very topical at the time of writing. Soldiers need to operate within a legal framework and be accountable for their decisions. There is nothing wrong with this, and we should embrace it as the core of our legitimacy. It is vital to ensure that such accountability works from a realistic baseline though, informed by the pressures and risks inherent in combat operations. Mistakes will happen, war is a terrible business, and second-guessing the men we send to fight for us is not a trivial undertaking.

- 7 We are currently very well paid for what we do, and well looked after in many other ways. We are at the upper limit of what society should be asked to provide for us, at the sacrifice of its other needs.
- 8 This was well expressed by Brigadier Stuart Smith in a communiqué to all 3 BDE warrant officers and officers:
- Area for Improvement: Remember the Bigger Picture
Maintaining a high tempo sometimes involves risk-taking. It's human nature to think within our lane of responsibility. Many of us have a tendency to provide command advice and make command demands based on what we see in our lane, as opposed to thinking about the Task Group as an entity. We must avoid this habit if we wish to be adept at complex war fighting along several lines of operation. If your specialist advice or requests are noted but not actioned, do not be thin-skinned or lower your morale. Understand that commanders will make assessments and judge risks differently. Stay focussed on the overall mission.
[Exercise HAMEL, 18 October 2010]
- 9 This is a reference to the poem 'If' by Rudyard Kipling—a wonderfully inspiring template for personal success.
- 10 I realised this a bit late. A lot of things can simply be ignored. If you assess something as nugatory and discard it, then generally you never hear anything more about it. If your input is important to someone then they will come back to you. This feels discourteous, but the reality is that email allows a bombardment of correspondence far in excess of previous norms. It has become unrealistic to respond to everything, especially given other priorities.
- 11 Heterosis, or 'hybrid vigor' or 'outbreeding enhancement', is the increased function of any biological quality in a hybrid offspring. It is the occurrence of a genetically superior offspring from mixing the genes of its parents.
- 12 A nautical expression referring to the employment of locally expert pilots to aid navigation: no matter what the pilot says, the ship's captain always maintains command of the ship and responsibility for safe passage.
- 13 For example, the contractor Baulderstone-Hornibrook building the new facilities for 7 RAR at Edinburgh had completed 2.2 million man-hours of work at the time of writing, with only one Lost Time Injury. This is an excellent result, but by no means unusual in the construction industry. Army work has some necessarily dangerous aspects, but we can do a lot better.

THE AUTHOR

Colonel Rupert Hoskin is currently deployed to Afghanistan, serving in the Operations Division of HQ ISAF. His previous postings include 3 CER, HQ 3 Bde, 21 Construction Squadron, ADFA, Army HQ, Infrastructure Division, and as the Defence Adviser to the Parliamentary Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade. He deployed to Timor Leste with the 3 RAR Bn Gp as an engineer squadron commander and to Bosnia as an engineer operations officer. His non-military experiences include working for UNHCR in Niger, for Woodside on the North West Shelf, and on the Jubilee Line Extension Project in London. Colonel Hoskin has tertiary qualifications in engineering, business administration and defence studies, and he is a French linguist.
