
Brief for personal use: Command philosophy

Major C. Parsons, NZ Army

...The highest reward for success is the inward knowledge that has been rightly won. Praise or blame was regarded with indifference by Lawrence. He did his duty as he saw it before him.

Allenby¹

Background

1. **Reason for Brief.** This information brief is written as personal notes, as such it will be written in the first person. It outlines what I consider to be the fundamental elements of my command philosophy (those issues I consider will create the greatest challenges for my time in command and my strategies for dealing with them).
2. My philosophy is geared to commanding soldiers and officers who are very professional and jealous of that reputation. Moreover they have very high expectations of anyone who seeks to lead them in terms of the leader's own professionalism, fitness and commitment. These are the men and women of the 1st New Zealand Special Air Service Group. (Annex A gives a brief description of the unit and its nature).
3. **Scope of the brief.** This brief will cover the following areas:
 - a. definitions of command and leadership I have adopted; and
 - b. my personal approach to command.

Definitions

4. My definitions of command and leadership are as follows. I favour the US and Australian definition of command:

The authority that a commander in the Armed Forces lawfully exercises over subordinates by virtue of rank or assignment. Command includes the authority and responsibility for effectively using available resources and for planning the employment of, organizing, directing, coordinating, and controlling military forces for the accomplishment of assigned missions. It also includes responsibility for health, welfare, morale, and discipline of assigned personnel. ²

'In principle, command (in particular, identifying what needs to be done and why) embraces both management activities (allocating the means [resources] to achieve it) and leadership (getting subordinates to achieve it).'³ I will have a staff that will assist in managing the unit but leadership is personal and therefore leadership will be the key distinguishing aspect of my time in command.

5. Leadership has been defined differently by almost every theorist and commentator on the subject. I am yet to find a definition of leadership that fully grasps its essence; it seems to be something intrinsic that defies placement in a pigeonhole. For that reason I am not wedded to any particular definition. I do however agree with the US Army approach to leadership which can be summarised as BE, KNOW, DO.

BE the leader of character: embrace Army values and demonstrate leader attributes. Study and practise so that you have the skills to **KNOW** your job. Then act, **DO** what's right to achieve excellence [and take care of your people] ... That is what makes a successful leader, one who lives the principles of **BE, KNOW, DO**.⁴

6. Having beachcombed military doctrine, read the major leadership theorists and thought on the topic for over 14 years, my personal view of command is as follows: its bestowal is one of the highest privileges a country can give. A commander is responsible for achieving assigned missions and in doing so stewarding two of the country's most precious assets, its freedom and its soldiers. To achieve this a commander must manage (resources) and lead (motivate subordinates in the accomplishment of missions) and finally a commander has only achieved half of the task if the unit has not been improved by his efforts.

Personal approach to command

7. Here I will consider two things, what I consider to be the basic make-up of a warrior and what my tenets are for commanding him.⁵

8. **Warrior Qualities.** The Defence Force is today's warrior class. For a warrior to be fully effective I believe he should possess three core attributes. He should be able to take life, save life and possess the intrinsic moral qualities that allow him to rise above the tempest of conflict:

- a. A warrior's business is the application of force. He should be able to do this with his bare hands as well as with weapons and as part of an orchestrated group. He should be mature enough in this skill to discern when to apply force including lethal force and when not to.
- b. Sometimes understated is the ability to heal. In combat every warrior must be able to apply first aid at least to himself and his mates, as well as wounded enemy and those innocents whose misfortune it is to be caught in the conflict.
- c. Moral qualities are hard to quantify. I believe they encompass more than just morale, morale is a crucial force multiplier but it is situational—it comes and goes. Warriors need a solid foundation from which they draw resolve and which provides them an inner compass to navigate the complexity of modern combat. My strength comes from Christian values and I have found prayer is one of the most powerful tools in my armoury. In Timor when doing a raid on one town the inhabitants were massed in its centre making our job easier—just as I had prayed they would be. In Africa I drove up and down a land-mined road for months before it was de-mined. Our first contingent to Afghanistan was farewelled from the unit history room with a *Karakia* (Maori for prayer): it was the only contingent that came home without injury. Others may find strength and direction from regimental spirit⁶ or organisational values. Regardless of where they draw it from, warriors need moral strength that transcends the situation.

9. As a commander I believe I must forge a highly lethal team, which is mature enough to discern when not to use force. I also have a responsibility to ensure they can save life especially their own and that of their team members. Finally I must foster moral strength by providing purpose, a sense of unit belonging and an example of ethical behaviour and expectations.

10. **Tenets.** The three attributes aside there are some guiding principles I believe should colour how I command. The first four of these are Sir David Stirling's, they are timeless and directly applicable to service in the SAS. The other tenets are derived from my own experience. The years will

bring more: however the aim here is to commit to ten tenets, which I can use to shape my approach to command. I intend to review these each year and over time refine the list, which will remain at ten. My ten tenets are currently:

- a. **The unrelenting pursuit of excellence.** Demand high standards and higher standards of self—look for excellence in the small things and keep to the moral high ground. Doing a good job is the minimum standard, every member should strive to improve the unit and this starts with me.
- b. **Maintaining the highest standards of discipline.** ‘A high standard of self-discipline in each soldier is the only effective foundation of regimental discipline. Commitment to the SAS pursuit of excellence becomes a sham if any single one of the disciplinary standards is allowed to slip.’⁷
- c. **Brook no sense of class.** ‘All ranks of the SAS are of one company in which a sense of class is both alien and ludicrous.’⁸
- d. **Humour and humility.** ‘Both these virtues are indispensable in the everyday life of officers and men—particularly so in the case of the SAS which is often regarded as an elite regiment. Without frequent recourse to humour and humility, our special status could cause resentment in other units ... and an unbecoming conceit and big-headedness in our own soldiers.’⁹
- e. **Self-sacrifice before self-indulgence.** The ethos of service is fundamental to a fully effective defence force, but especially to a unit like the SAS. The SAS is more than just a unit. It is an ideal, a way of thinking, an audacious approach to warfare and all who serve must place this at the heart of their actions. In a unit that often operates as small independent teams, each member must look first to the mission, then the team, then themselves. Notwithstanding, mission focus obligates each member to look after themselves in order to be mission capable. This starts with me: may it never be said that my standards slipped or I profited at the expense of the unit.
- f. **Manage the present and proof the future.** Command carries the responsibility for stewarding the resources allocated and setting the unit on a wise course that will serve future commanders well. This is the KNOW and DO of Army leadership.
 - (1) Management of the present is founded on sound administration and training. Administration underpins combat power, it should focus on efficiency, effectiveness and simplicity. Training should be hard, relevant, and equip the participants for future responsibility and operations. There is no excuse for substandard training.
 - (2) The future of the unit is founded on its people, its reputation and innovation. The unit is only as good as its selection standard which must remain immutable. The unit reputation equates to the level of confidence politicians and generals have in it. It must be jealously guarded. Innovation links back to the relentless pursuit of excellence. Every member must restlessly seek new and smarter methods of operating. Commanders must anticipate future developments and train to meet them, by doing this the unit will always be ready.
- g. **Do not be ambiguous or indecisive**—(order then counter order = disorder). Delegate tasks and empower subordinates to carry them out. Set the boundaries early. Pay attention to the details during brief-backs and then get out of the road.

- h. **Do not take short cuts.** Whilst an exacting boss is often not immediately appreciated, a slack taskmaster is never respected in retrospect.
- i. **Be friendly, firm, fair and seen.** Soldiers and officers should be comfortable in asking for advice and critiquing aspects of the unit. However as standard bearer, along with the RSM, I must not compromise on principle. Discipline and reward must be administered with equality. If in doubt soldiers should be favoured over officers. Finally, history teaches that effective commanders communicate their vision and a sense of purpose by knowing their troops and commanding by walking around.
- j. **Win.** Reinforce success and take risks when going forward. Audacity and speed brings its own security. Winning generally comes from out-thinking the opposition and being better prepared. Therefore think conceptually, plan in detail and execute with flexibility. Remember a plan is not a plan unless it has contingencies. Rehearse, rehearse, and rehearse!

11. In summary the thoughts above provide a framework in which I can calibrate my approach to command and leadership should in the future I be given the privilege and awesome responsibility to lead and command New Zealand's toughest troops.

Target Audience and Unit Description

General

1. The target audience of this information brief is not subordinates or superiors, but myself. There are two reasons for this approach. Firstly in the New Zealand (NZ) Army it would be unusual for a prospective CO to tender a command philosophy to superiors. Secondly whilst there is much within my philosophy that I would communicate to subordinates there are also elements that I think would be more powerfully expressed as actions rather than words. Therefore I intend to use this exercise as a personal tool to synthesise my thoughts on command, for later use.
2. The unit I am in contention to command is 1st New Zealand Special Air Service Group (1 NZSAS Gp). For security reasons it will only be briefly described.

Description of the unit

3. 1 NZSAS Gp is NZ's only military Special Forces unit. It is responsible for the full range of special operations missions. The unit was first established by request of the British Government in 1954 to assist 22 SAS Regiment in Malaya. Since then it has developed and retains a reputation of excellence in jungle operations as well as all other operating environments. The structure of the unit will not be discussed here.

Nature of the unit

4. Three factors, its members, its history and the nature of the NZ military heavily influence the nature of the unit. Unit members fall into one of two categories 'badged' and support staff. Those who have completed SAS selection and training are termed 'badged', they are the warfighters of the unit. Most are mature soldiers, all are men, they are highly skilled, motivated and have high expectations of their leaders. Support staff fill the appointments required to facilitate special operations missions. These men and women are a mix of civilian and military and have a large range of skills and experience.
5. The unit has a proud history and a tradition of intensive training standards. Whilst the NZ Special Forces lineage can be traced back to the Forest Rangers in the NZ Wars of the 1860s, the SAS lineage comes directly from Sir David Stirling's vision in the 1940s.
6. The final factor to shape the nature of the unit is the nature of the NZ military, which resources it with equipment and personnel and provides the framework in which the unit operates. The NZ military is a professional organisation, but resource constrained. Spartan resourcing has led to a unit culture that seeks to maximise the effect of those resources we do have. Our most important resource is our manpower and therefore the unit invests heavily in individuals through arduous and thorough training. Resource constraints have also bred a culture of innovation in terms of tactics and equipment design: however I believe this can be even further developed.

WHO DARES WINS

Endnotes

1. Lawrence of Arabia's obituary, by Field Marshal Sir Edmund Allenby, Viscount of Armageddon, 19 May 1935.
2. Joint Electronic Library, 2003, *Joint Publication 1-02, DOD Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, US Department of Defense.
3. Ministry of Defence, 1995, *Army Doctrine Publication Volume 2 Command*, London, p. 12.
4. Headquarters Department of the Army, 1999, *Field Manual No. 22-100 Army Leadership*, Washington, DC, p. 6.
5. I use the term 'he' because it is more readable than he/she and those I will command next year and those I aspire to command as a unit commander are generally men.
6. It is widely recognised that the source of much of the British combat effectiveness through the ages has been Regimental spirit. This was certainly the case in the New Zealand Wars (Belich).
7. Colonel, Sir David Stirling, DSO, OBE, date and location unknown.
8. *ibid.*
9. *ibid.*

