

Captain BS Forethought answers the question on every Sgt Maj's lips 'What is the point of officers?'

Officership is dead, long live officers

"All they do is say Go". They say a whining soldier is a happy soldier, but Sgt F_ was laying it on thick. "I mean what do they actually DO? They just waltz around deciding stuff that anyone with half a brain would do anyway, then writing it down in a really long winded way. What is the point of them? F_cking Ruperts."

I had assumed that it was the Horror Bag that had set Sgt F_ off when he was complaining to me on the coach back from Salisbury Plain, but this was deeper, and it set me thinking. What is the point of officers?

Resentment of Ruperts (derogatory slang for an officer) has always run deep in the Non-Commissioned ranks, it forms the plot of most of the Sharpe novels. Many a blog site such as OAF Nation, Terminal Lance, ARRSE and Doctrine Man constantly carry articles pitching how western forces should do away with the whole antiquated façade. But it is a resentment laced with grudging inevitability as historically whenever NCO only units have been formed they have not performed nearly as well as those with Commissioned Officers (see Richard Holmes's discussion of the WO3 in Soldiers). Even the Special Forces have not seen fit to disband completely with the concept. Today we regularly have officers with 2 A-levels commanding NCOs with PhDs and such is the speed of change in technology, rank and experience have lost a lot of their association with professional knowledge which they held in the past. So then again, what is the point of officers?

The answer we tell ourselves is 'Officership'. We issue our new Officer Cadets with little books of quotes and vignettes about good examples to follow, and bad ones to avoid. We give lectures about how officers just need to 'get it'. We subject ICSC candidates and subalterns to reams of essays to express how wonderful a concept 'Officership' is. But when trying to tie down what it actually means it becomes remarkably difficult to do so. Doctor Patrick Mileham's paper "'Fit and Proper Persons': Officership Revisited", gives perhaps the best articulation of the orthodox view by breaking it into:

- 1) The acceptance of risk;
- 2) Values, standards, and leadership;
- 3) Fiduciary duty; and,
- 4) The moral compass.

And who can argue with any of these points? Surely we want officers who take responsibility for their comrades, who lead ethically, demand diligence, work hard, who don't go starting coups every 5 minutes, and ones who make moral judgements. All fine stuff indeed, no-body wants the obverse of these things. But this fundamentally fails to answer the question. What's the point of officers?

We want everybody in the Armed Forces to do these things. Mileham says "'office holders' are 'agents', making significant choices in what is known as the process of 'agency theory', making things happen." Well it seems Doctor Mileham has missed the entire point of agency theory, which is of course that everybody is an agent, from the lowest private soldier to the Prime Minister, all of whom are acting in accordance with the particular incentive structure at work (which includes notions of honour and morality) in their position in the complex world they live. Mileham continues, "The noun, 'initiative' springs to mind, the verb 'initiate' springs into action, hopefully of the right sort." Well again there is nothing inherently 'officerly' about using ones initiative – we can all cite plenty of examples of its application and avoidance by people on both sides of the commissioned line – and to say it is the preserve of the Officer Corps is frankly deluded.

What else is supposed to differentiate the Officer here? Are Officers meant to exist as some sort of Orwellian thought police to manage the base instincts of the febrile man off the street? Are Sandhurst and Dartmouth built not to train Officers, but to ensure the political reliability of the Officer Corps? To check and prevent the barely contained Non-Commissioned urge to rape, pillage, and overthrow the Government?

What I want to suggest is that the idea that Officers exist as some sort of exemplars of virtue and initiative is to both insult the courage, sacrifice, and expertise of our Non-Commissioned brethren, and bequeaths upon officers a deeply unhelpful messiah complex. The oft quoted quip that 'Officers' bring class to what would otherwise be a vulgar brawl' is simultaneously vulgar in its own right, but to fundamentally misunderstands what officers bring to the party.

For officers are not there for moral guidance, that's what Padres are for. Nor is any of those aspects listed above particularly useful when faced with many of the dilemmas we give to people in the Armed Forces - where they are constantly given problems that sit in an ethical grey area. We too often forget the use of military force is the ultimate act of moral relativism. By setting Officers up as paragons of perfect virtue you are setting the whole system up to fail as not only will no-one will ever live up to it, but it detracts us from understanding what Officers are really there for.

Officers are not a useful innovation because they are moral. Officers are a useful innovation because they are expendable. The real point of Officers is that you can sack them.

For what I want to suggest is that Officers aren't experts and professionals at all, NCOs are professionals and specialists, Officers are amateurs and generalists, in fact they are the management consultants of the military world. Now, a thousand moustaches are bristling at this, but I want to contend that this is not as ridiculous as it sounds. I know consultants come across as rather odious, arrogant, self-involved, pseudo-intellectual brats, but to get one ones high horse as an officer about this lacks a certain self-knowledge, because that is exactly what NCOs think Officers are.

Let me explain, what does a management consultant actually do?

- 1) they are generalists who look into specialist problems;
- 2) They take problems, figure out solutions, and then communicate them; and,
- 3) They take the blame.

What do Officers do?

Well they are generalists who are able to see the wider context from the particular problem set of organisation they happen to be a part of now. One only has to watch a Direct Entry office try and get his head around the insanities of a Quartermasters department to see what I mean by this.

The look at problems, figure out solutions (estimates) and communicate them (orders). The rhythm of problem, analyse, decide, communicate is at the heart of what military decision making is all about and what both consultants and officers do day to day. Just as no-one calls the consultants when there are making a 20 per cent ROI per annum, neither do NCOs bother officers when they have no problems (as Colin Powell said 'the moment your men stop bringing you their problems is the moment you stop leading them', officers exist to solve problems).

And most importantly, they take the blame. By blame here, I don't just mean the blame in the legal sense, I mean the blame in the internal political sense. So let us hypothesise a difficult decision needs to be made in a factory, they need to sack a 1000 people, well no-one who has been employed by that factory for 20 years wants to sack 1000 despite the fact many in the organisation deep down know it has to happen. So the factory calls the consultants who say 'you need to sack 1000 people' to which the management can then say 'we have to do it, the consultants said so'. This is exactly the same in the military sphere, no-one enjoys digging trenches, or scrubbing decks, or sending soldiers into machine gun fire, but by having a handy person who is of the 'other' (hence the pageantry of officers) so the organisation has a useful target for them to vent their annoyance, resentment and anger.

This also means that if whenever a measure or plan doesn't work, then you can rid yourselves of the consultant or officer in question without destroying the internal coherence of the unit. The fact is more often than not plans won't work for all sorts of reasons completely out of the control of whichever unit or officer it is. But the 'otherness' of the officer means that there can be an act of catharsis afterwards when a unit can say 'it wasn't our fault, it was his fault'. It also means that all levels of command there is someone who has a very personal incentive to make sure everyone acts in accordance with the rules, as otherwise they are getting a P45. Officers don't act morally because they themselves are intrinsically moral, but because their pension depends on them being so.

By repeating the sanctimonious half-baked waffle about 'Officership' we have forgotten the actual value officers add and why they are important. Instead we now have a generation of senior officers who are so imbued with the unquestioned and intellectually vapid creed of 'Values Based Leadership' that they are now petrified of attaching themselves to any decision of action that could be construed as risky or morally ambiguous, which of course all military decisions by definition are. Consequently those who rise end up believing they are in some sense more morally worthy than their fellows, a dangerous and deluded mentality which forgets the first rule of PR, don't believe your own bullshit.

Instead what we should do is recognise that the Officer Corps is just a consultancy firm

imbedded inside the military, no more objectively morally worthy than McKinsey or Bain. This should allow us to question some of the old presuppositions about how the Officer Corps should operate.

Instead of spending untold millions paying consultants for them to tell us the blindingly obvious, let us pay them the ultimate flattery and imitate them.

War is always a vulgar brawl, to think otherwise is to misunderstand its nature, what the Officer Corps exist to do is make sure we fight vulgar brawls better than anyone else.

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