Reviewed by Ian Shields, Research Associate, U K Defence Forum

Even as a retired RAF officer, the name General Sir Richard Dannatt means a great deal to me, not only for his well-known and (in my eyes) courageous stance defending the Army when he was Chief of the General Staff (CGS), but also as a thinker on moral issues, including his contributions to the Just War debate. I therefore approached his autobiography "Leading from the front" with some eagerness.

The General has enjoyed a remarkable career, as the first half of the book makes clear. Neither intent on an Army career when he first joined, nor on joining the infantry, his rise is all the more remarkable given that he "lost" two years as a junior officer. He survived a major stroke that could have killed him, led to him being medically discharged from the Army, or at least cost him too much time in the very competitive promotion stakes. Clearly, quality and capability shine through and Sir Richard rose to the very top. His career, from a warrior during the Cold War, through a remarkable amount of peace-keeping/peace-enforcement/nation building, with first-hand experience in Northern Ireland (including the award of a Military Cross), Cyprus and the Balkans, to Whitehall Warrior is addressed in simple, matter-of-fact language that downplays his own contributions but captures the challenges and responses that the British Army has faced over the past forty years. Indeed, the General's career is a remarkable representation of all that the Service he so clearly loves has undertaken during the last three decades of the twentieth century, and the first of this.

Well written, meticulous in its attention to details and well-paced, I nevertheless found myself approaching the middle of the book waiting for some stunning insight, analysis of history or twist of fate. Instead, we had a progression of facts, a career clearly in the ascendency and a raft of characters, all of whom are praised: It seems remarkable that the General met so few people with whom he had issues, or has chosen not to air them. There seem to be few warts he has to report.

The second half of this four hundred page autobiography deals with the latter stages of his career, and introduces us much more clearly to the interface of the military with the political sphere at the very highest level. Here there are some insights into characters, and some analysis of events. General Dannatt deals in a forthright and honest manner with the relationship he enjoyed (or, more accurately, endured) with the media and the various spats he had with them when he was CGS. He explains, in appropriate detail and with total candour, the approach from David Cameron shortly after he left his post as CGS, and why he has not subsequently appeared as a member of the Conservative Party and as a Minister. The closing two chapters, "What About Tomorrow?" and "Tomorrow Starts Today" and particularly the Epilogue titled "Last Post?" are a very clear and robust exposition of his views on defence and are well worth reading as we approach the outcome of the Strategic Defence and Security Review in October 2010. Throughout the book three themes are most clear: Sir Richard's love for his family, his love for his Service, and his deep and abiding religious faith.

And yet... And yet... The first half, a straightforward history captures a period of great change

and great challenge, and might offer some excellent lessons on how to conduct nation-building, but this is implied in the narrative rather than spelled out in the manner of, say, Sir Rupert Smith's "War Among the People" thesis. The later chapters include more analysis of events, but the views that they offer will likely date rapidly with the passage of time, and their relevance may be short-lived.

Maybe I have missed the point, but I ended the book asking "so what?" In recording a fascinating four decades that history will likely judge as remarkable through his own experiences so accurately, our former CGS has done future historians a favour. But I feel that the General – clearly incredibly bright and with so much more to offer – has produced a straightforward autobiography that while of great interest to a small circle does not contribute greatly to our deeper understanding of conflict, recent, contemporary and future.

It is my fervent hope that Sir Richard follows this acceptable but somewhat self-indulgent autobiography with a "Utility of Force"-style Magnus Opus, for not only am I convinced that he is the right person at the right time to offer such a book, in which his intelligence, analysis and insights would afford him the opportunity to get to the heart of ongoing debate on the nature and conduct of conflict, and deliver through that medium the knock-out blow that I found lacking in "Leading From The Front".