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The Role of the Non Commissioned Officer in the British Army

“Just one word of warning here, and it’s a personal one: what we need to be able to do, and I speak now as a Brit, is to fight with our allies (that’s self-evident), but not necessarily ‘as’ our allies do. There is a British way of warfare. Its roots are deep in our history. We are the product of our own nation and we will set about our military business in a peculiarly British way. So I stress that we should be able to fight ‘with’ allies, but not necessarily as ‘them’.

General Sir Mike Jackson
Chief of the General Staff
Addressing the RUSI June 2003

Introduction

A defining characteristic of the British way of warfare is the role and the place of the Non Commissioned Officer (NCO) in the British army. Some other armies in the world, notably those with an “Imperial” link to Britain, are akin; otherwise no other armies have a similar culture; nor do they have the same relationship between its officers and NCOs. Most armies of the world are envious of this unique relationship that time and again has proved its worth on the battlefield and peace support operations across the globe.

The key feature is the long tradition in the relationship between the senior NCO and the young officer. It starts at initial training. This is clearly illustrated at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst where Colour Sergeants and Warrant Officers serve as instructors, not just for drill and skill-at-arms, which is normal practice everywhere, but as tactics instructors at platoon level. In many cases these NCOs act as mentors. Indeed the relationship forged between the officer cadets and their platoon Colour Sergeants is an enduring feature of the British army. It is a relationship that we meddle with at our peril.

The roles of the NCO in the Royal Navy and the Royal Air Force are equally distinctive and each has its own ethos and culture. But when it comes to waging war the Royal Navy and the Royal Air Force are more closely linked to the Americans than the Army is.

This paper is divided into two parts: Part 1 looks at the place and role of the NCO within the British land forces, who he or she is, what they do and their place in the military hierarchy. We have included the Royal Marines in the equation even though they are a part of the Senior Service, because they are similarly organised and attend many of the same courses. Part 2 looks to the future and introduces some ideas on how we might make better use of this valuable and experienced pool of manpower.

NCOs: Who are they?

The NCO corps of the Army can be divided into three parts. Junior NCOs, Senior NCOs and Warrant Officers:

- At the most junior level there are Lance Corporals and Corporals. Junior NCOs (JNCO) have direct control of the smallest fighting, support or logistic units in the order of battle: the section of infantry, the main battle tank or an artillery gun crew.
- The second group is the Senior NCOs (SNCOs). Sergeants and Colour or Staff Sergeants act as Troop or Platoon Sergeants, in addition to the direct command of a fighting vehicle in the case of the armoured corps.
- At the most Senior Level are Warrant Officers and Quartermaster Sergeant Majors. They act as Squadron and Company Sergeant Majors (SSM or CSM), Regimental Quartermaster Sergeant Majors (RQMS) all in the rank of WO2.
- At the very top of the NCO tree are the Regimental Sergeant Majors (RSMs) and Conductors in the rank of Warrant Officer Class 1 (WO1).

All soldiers, (other ranks) join the Army, aged 16+ and are contracted to serve for up to 22 years with option points at the three, six, nine and 12 year points. It is common practice within the combat arms for soldiers to remain in the same company or squadron until they are promoted to sergeant. The average soldier serves for nine to ten years, during which time he is likely to achieve NCO rank. During a full career soldiers will typically only complete three tours away from regimental duty. Embraced within the regimental system the sub unit offers an environment in which he or she can mature and develop within familiar surroundings. It is also in the sub unit that the individual will be at greatest risk on operations – at the cutting edge. In essence the sub unit and de facto the regiment or corps to which the NCO belongs is the primary factor for existence.

As the soldier progresses through his 22-year career, gaining experience and qualifications through training, he or she moves into the middle management of the armed forces and increasingly take on an executive management function.

According to the most recently available figures, during 2000-2001 the Army recruited 14,714 officers and soldiers. In the same period it lost 15,142 officers and soldiers. The outflow of NCOs from the army is not available. However, it is the case that the premature loss of an NCO is bad and of a SNCO worse, because of the amount of low level experience and training they take away with them is enormous.

How many NCOs are there in the Army?

Without access to official documents we can only estimate the number of NCOs in the Army. As of 1st April 2003 the Regular Army establishment comprised approximately 110,000 all ranks (excluding 3,800 Gurkhas). There are around 12,800 trained officers and 83,500 trained soldiers, including NCOs. The Regular and Territorial Army have 192 major units and the size of regiments and battalions vary. The ratio of officers to NCOs to other ranks is variable depending on the unit concerned. An armoured reconnaissance regiment has approximately 32 officers and about 229 NCOs in an establishment of 405 personnel in total. An infantry battalion has an established

strength of about 750, and approximately the same number of NCOs. A military provost company, in which all soldiers are NCOs, will only have two officers. A Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineer unit will again have a very high proportion of NCOs because of the technical nature of their role. In general terms it is estimated there are probably at least 40,000 NCOs in the British Army.

Relationships with superiors and subordinates.

There are many ways of describing the role of the NCO and the place he holds in the Army. In simplistic terms the commissioned officer leads, commands and directs; the NCO organises and administers and the soldier executes. In reality the relationship is far more complex and probably demands a paper in its own right. The popular image often portrayed in the media and which persists in modern soaps is flawed and a long way from the truth and the reality of soldiering in the twentieth first century. It is important to understand that the officer-NCO-soldier triangular relationship is now a very sophisticated one. Each part of that triangle is an equal in the context of the team in which they operate. The interplay and relationship demands mutual trust and respect. In special forces units the officer/NCO relationship almost disappears completely, but still not quite.

Modern soldiers are well educated, resourceful, can think for themselves and have their own clear opinions. Each of the elements in the military chain of command has distinct and overlapping roles. When this relationship works well, through good training and mutual understanding and trust there is often a complete absence of direct orders in the old fashioned sense. Rather the operation swings into action through a series of concurrent and consecutive events known in the jargon as battle procedure.

The one aspect that puts officers apart is that NCOs, in general terms, do not command soldiers. However, they are absolutely critical in providing tactical and technical expertise, administration and discipline through the ranks. In some cases in peacetime and in battle NCOs will take command. Indeed many are perfectly capable of doing so.

In one regiment of cavalry the Warrant Officers lead the regiment on parade in recognition of the Second World War battle in Burma when all the officers had been killed or wounded and the attack was pressed home by the surviving SNCOs. However, officers stand apart and are expected to do so. Officers have the ability to think more quickly and possess greater initiative. General Rupert Smith is very clear on this difference. When talking post Gulf War he made the point that troops and platoons commanded by officers were far better than those commanded by NCOs as they were better able to meet the unexpected.

In 2000 for the first time the British Army brought together all the aspects of art of soldiering into a doctrinal pamphlet entitled 'Soldiering - the Military Covenant'. This pamphlet became the basis for the values and standards of the British Army. The importance of the British NCO is to be found in the role played by the collective strength of the Warrant Officers and Sergeants Mess on operations worldwide.

"Soldiers of all ranks will have increasing responsibility, influence and significance in battle and other operations. They are likely to be more dispersed, and operate in greater isolation than ever before. Their smallest actions may have operational, strategic or even political implications. Many operations will require new attitudes, thinking and skills from all ranks."

Role

The NCO in the British Army is the individual that makes it all happen. The officers on the staff of a Headquarters plan and direct, their instructions are passed down the chain of command to the Brigadiers and Lieutenant Colonels and Majors and Captains who will issue orders for the particular operation. In the final analysis the individuals who make sure the soldiers are there on time, in the right kit, briefed for the operation are the NCOs. They form the middle management, the backbone of the army. They maintain the traditions and standards. They maintain the discipline and the administration. They sort the problems little and large. It does not matter if it is fire fighting in Leeds, building

a bridge in Bosnia or engaging the Iraqi Army on the outskirts of Basra in Iraq. Lance Corporal Smith will be leader of the fire-fighting team, Staff Sergeant Jones will be directing the Field Engineer Team and Troop Sergeant Brown will be backing up his troop leader in his Challenger 2 main battle tank.

General Jackson in his RUSI address alluded to what he called “the Three-Block War” at Basra. And those who followed the campaign on television, both at the time and subsequently in some of the excellent fly-on-the-wall documentaries that have been broadcast, could not help but be aware that:

- At the very front end there was some very hard fighting.
- In the middle, operations were underway in areas that had recently been liberated and where the transition from war to peace support was still taking place.
- And in the rear, humanitarian aid was already beginning to flow to those in need.

These three diverse activities were taking place at the same time, in different sub-units of the same military formation and in a relatively compressed geographical area. Professionalism and military training of the highest order coupled to an easy understanding though the rank structure made such a complex operation possible. And the guiding hand in the execution of the mission was the NCO at the respective levels.

It is the case that in each and every regiment and battalion of the British Army it will be the collective effort of the SNCOs that oil the wheels of the particular unit. They are probably more intensively loyal to the name of their regiment than the officers. Unlike the officers, who spend at least part of their service away from their own outfit, the SNCOs can spend all of their 22 years service with that particular regiment.

However, given the remarkable expertise that individuals invariably accumulate during that time, should not greater attention be paid to options for retention in service beyond 22 years?

Part Two – the challenges of the future

This sections addresses the challenges of the future under the headings of career aspirations, retention and tour intervals and finally options that could be considered to enhance the use of the NCO.

The paper began by looking at tradition, but what of the future? Secretary of State for Defence Geoff Hoon stated recently that he did not envisage a large-scale British military deployment without the Americans alongside. General Mike Jackson talked of the armed forces being “pitched against adversaries about whom our knowledge will be rather less than ideal and against whom an engagement is required at short notice.”

The future way of warfare will likely take the form of strategic raiding where the requirement will be to deploy troops and their equipment over long distances and then engage against an opponent with little or no time to practice, acclimatize or deploy heavy weaponry. The need will be to travel light and still achieve a decisive outcome. As the UK develops forces for these kinds of operations there will be a need to develop the understanding and skills of the NCO to meet the challenges.

The development of the philosophy of Mission Command has further enhanced the importance of the NCO. The junior NCOs in Desert Storm were the Colour Sergeants and WOs in Operation Telic in 2003, trained to accept, in the words of the British Army Handbook:

“.. unusually heavy demands made on their initiative, innovation, adaptability, resourcefulness, humanity, moral courage and judgement.”

Within the Armed Forces the NCO is seen as the vital link between the officer and the soldier. They receive status and respect.

The problem is that outside the Armed Forces the NCO is frequently undervalued and on occasion lampooned. In a large part the blame for that is to be found in a persistent media stereotype that is portrayed in comedy and soaps which often revisits the officer/NCO relationship on a class basis. When NCOs, particularly SNCOs, quit the Army they leave with a wealth of management and administrative experience but with no paper qualifications that are compatible with civilian life, except for those that have been in the technical corps. Thus they have to prove their employability to possible employers.

In proposing a new career structure for officers in 1994, Sir Michael Bett drew on the construct of the Three Ages of Man. This can also be used as a mechanism to analyse the NCO. Bett divided a military career into three stages: the First Age, starting as one joins the colours in the late teens or early twenties is a learning and experience stage. For soldiers it is the same. The Second Age: aged 30-40 is a period during which officers at least will have made the decision to make the Army a career and will be seeking to maximise his opportunities for advancement. For NCOs this period probably starts in their mid to late twenties, but their aspirations remain the same – advancement and career progression. And by this time both officer and other ranks will be married with young children. In the Third Age for officers, aged 40 and beyond the regiment assumes a less direct influence as their days of active soldiering come to an end and most jobs are on the staff or elsewhere.

For soldiers the third age does not exist. Unlike officers, soldiers and NCOs will only be involved in the first two ages. A 22 engagement will see them leaving at around 40-42 years of age. It is questionable why NCOs are denied the option of a further career. In the opinions of some it is a good thing since it allows a SNCO to re-establish himself out of the Army as a civilian whilst he is still young enough to do so. The counter and

prevailing view is that to make SNCOs redundant at this stage is a dreadful waste of resources and unfair to the individual.

During their service the two other main challenges to the retention of officer and soldier alike remain the tour interval and the level of separation. Soldiers join for action and none would wish to avoid operational tours. But the level of commitments established in the 1980 and 1990's has not been alleviated and shows no sign of reducing. Northern Ireland, the Falklands, United Nations in Cyprus and Beirut of the 1980's has become the Kuwait, Bosnia, Kosovo of the 1990s; Sierra Leone, Iraq, Afghanistan and continuation of the Balkans that of the 21st Century.

One armoured reconnaissance regiment of three sabre squadrons deployed in June 2003 to Iraq. It had completed some 14 squadron tours in the Balkans over the past decade and soldiers returning from Bosnia in May left for the Gulf the next month. These commitments across the Army result in immense pressure on families and children that eventually force parents to make a decision on their future career. No amount of goodwill, superb leadership or appeals to loyalty can alleviate that pressure. When this becomes too great, in reality these individuals will often simply leave.

Such increasing pressure, sometimes referred to as overstretch, indicates a serious need to examine alternative employment of Junior and Senior NCOs during their 22-year service contract in order to alleviate the pressures of constant operational deployments. Instruction at various schools and academies is one such route. But, because those functions have been increasingly civilianised the options for the NCO to be employed away from his regimental duties have been restricted.

The NCO terms of service allow for a 22-year career. In exceptional cases this may be extended but in general terms most NCOs leave at this point. They are around 40 years old, have immense experience and in most cases are fit and perfectly capable individuals. The removal of this pool of talent is probably the single biggest waste of military expertise.

The current system does allow for a limited number to continue in service as Quartermaster or Special Regular Officers and will permit a career to 55 years of age. There are a number of appointments at regimental duty. Assistant Adjutant, Motor Transport Officer, Quartermaster and Technical Quartermaster are all posts traditionally filled by ex Warrant Officers. Many of the non regular permanent staff (NRPS) appointments in the Territorial Army and Reserves are filled by ex SNCOs. But, it is generally accepted that many more ex SNCOs are very capable of further careers beyond the age of 40 years.

Recent measures have been taken to extend the careers of soldiers by widening the criteria of Late Entry commissions and extending NCO training at the Defence Academy at Shrivenham. It is now possible for a Late Entry commissioned NCO to take up a Short Service Special Regular Commission to age 50 and in some cases a Regular Commission to age 55. All Late Entry officers will in future receive training at the Joint Services Command and Staff College on a two-week special staff course to prepare them for appointments on the staff. Whilst these measures are to be welcomed it is questionable if they go far enough to attract and retain the pool of talent available.

There are appointments on the staff in Headquarters and elsewhere that the Army could profitably utilise so that it does not lose the vast amount of experience and expertise these NCOs possess. And there are a number of junior staff appointments that could be done by SNCOs, who could also be trained to fulfill many functions currently managed by junior officers and civilian staff.

It is certainly right that extending the careers of NCOs should be, in the main, outside of the regimental system. It is vital that swift career progression of other ranks is available with the major units of the Army. At the end of the day regimental soldiering is a young man's game. Nevertheless, there are many other appointments in the United Nations, multinational or national formation headquarters that could perfectly well be filled by individuals over the age of 40. Those of us who have visited multinational headquarters

in NATO or the United Nations will have encountered SNCOs of other nations that have assumed such functions quite adequately.

It is becoming clear that the Army has become too small to be able to afford the loss of its best-trained and experienced manpower. The established strength of the Army has never been realised despite a number of schemes designed to encourage continuation or re-enlistment and the Army has stubbornly remain 5-6,000 soldiers under strength for number of years. It might therefore be wise to revisit ways in which the SNCO pool might be better employed outside the regimental system to the benefit of the army. For instance a General Staff WO or SNCO rank could be created, or more SNCOs could be commissioned and provided with gainful employment beyond the age of 40 years old. These individuals could then be granted an extended career to 55 or even 60 years of age.

Conclusion

This paper has suggested some of those ideas. Foremost is the need to extend the employment of soldiers beyond the 22-year point. More commissioning is one possibility, the creation of a General Staff NCO is another. Meanwhile, alleviating the impact of overstretch by offering a wider employment structure, particularly at the mid-career point with a greater number of home-based jobs is another option worthy of further examination.

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