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“The Soldier of the Future - A Soldier without a Soul?”

Your Excellencies, fellow Chaplains, Ladies and Gentlemen; Firstly may I thank conference for the opportunity to contribute towards this morning's topic of “The Soldier of the Future - A Soldier Without a Soul?”. It is certainly a contemporary question and one which in turn presents very specific challenges, not only to those who in command within the Armed Forces but more specifically to we who minister to them. I must say at this juncture that I am not an ethicist but rather someone who has been privileged to be an Army Chaplain for over fourteen years spending over five years as a Chaplain-Instructor in three of our major Phase One Training Regiments.

Much of what I contribute this morning is based on my experiences of preparing young men and women aged 16-29 for military service.

The Contemporary Context

I would like to begin this presentation by looking at the contemporary context. It was stated by Francis Fukuyama that the end of the 20th Century marked the triumph of the West wherein capitalism, liberalism and democracy had emerged victors from the Cold War's protracted ideological conflicts and that the crumbling of the old Soviet system had somehow marked an “end of history” heralding a new beginning.

On the contrary, I believe that the current military context owes its origins more to a date around 1979 when the Cold War still had ten years to run. So why 1979?

Weil around 1979 very powerful world forces began to move;

1. The newly elected Polish Pope, JP II, began to prove that religion and nationhood mattered more than Lenin or Stalin would have cared to admit.
2. President Reagan sent shivers down the spine of European backs by referring to the Soviet Union as the "Empire of Evil".
3. Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran turned on the flamethrower of Islamic anger and jihad against the West.
4. Teng Sia Ping began to bring China back into world politics
5. But most significantly, Osama Bin Laden, still a Saudi playboy, found after the Mecca uprising of 1979 and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, a vocation in promoting Holy War.

So I suggest that what began a decade before the Wall came down, eventually led to the end of the stability of the bi-polar world and sowed the seeds of global terrorism - essentially an asymmetric response to a single superpower by the military dispossessed and the historically humiliated - dramatically illustrated in the attacks on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon. These events over a protracted period of time have been shaping the contemporary environment which will define for us all, the next phase of our military careers.

Consequently, it is the two major operations in Iraq and Afghanistan that are both key drivers of change and the all-consuming focus of the British Army today.

Returning now to the subject of our Conference topic - the Soldier. I propose to look at the issue in four distinct yet related sections;

- The concept of the Military Covenant
- The importance of creating and encouraging a strong sense of personal identity and character.

- The importance of belief and personal faith in the lives of a combatant.

- And the particular values espoused by the Chain of Command as essential in preparing young soldiers for military duty.

I have always believed that military ethics is about learning what is good and true and then having the courage to do what is right. It is about the responsibility of all who serve in the Armed Forces to be men and women of character.

After all, persons of strong character are the ultimate resource for any military organisation and they are by definition persons of integrity - individuals whose actions are consistent with their beliefs.

The failure to inculcate an ethic into military service whereby an Armed Force has no measure by which to judge or assess its actions, will court moral and military disaster. After all, the soul purpose of our Armed Forces remains military effectiveness; that is to say success in war and other operations. But military effectiveness cannot be based on functional output alone, and unless it is focussed on higher, external ethics, an Army risks moral bankruptcy.

In essence, Soldiers must know that what they do is right and that they have the support of their nation, their society and their government.

The Armed Forces of the United Kingdom created the concept of The Military Covenant after a series of very high profile and public Courts Martial relating to the infringement of human rights and instances of a breakdown in military discipline by soldiers serving in Iraq.

It enjoins all who undertake military service to accept, acknowledge and put into practice a set of personal standards and core Values, which as stated by the Chain of Command, "have been developed to underpin our ethos and formally codify the standards of conduct essential to sustain the moral component of fighting power". Every soldier, officer and chaplain entering military service must, without

exception embrace the Core Values of Courage, Discipline, Respect for Others, Integrity, Loyalty and Selfless Commitment as the basis of their service within the military community.

The Military Covenant acknowledges that “the Army must take a different and more prescriptive approach towards certain types of behaviour and relationships which might, in other employments, be regarded purely as a matter of individual choice or morality, and of no concern to the wider community.” It acknowledges that for the person who serves, their attitudes, behaviour and the manner by which they relate to others both within and outside the military community, will be tested by their adherence to the Military Covenant and their living out of the Core Values as a non-negotiable and compliant condition of service.

Any infringement of these standards whereby the “actions of an individual adversely impacted or are likely to impact on the efficiency or operational effectiveness of the Army“ may result in administrative action or dismissal from the Service.

What the Chain of Command has recognised is the fact that “soldiers who are empowered to make well reasoned moral decisions, on the basis of their adherence to a prescriptive code of standards and values, will more likely exercise proper initiative and less likely err by commission or omission“.

So, how do we adequately prepare young men and women entering military service to appropriately, professionally and morally undertake the many faceted roles which present to them on operations, whether they be peace-keeping, peace-enforcement or combat roles?

The greatest challenge to instructors within our Phase I training regiments is to be found in the constant and stubborn attempts to create within a recruit intake, an interdependent community of persons out of a group of very determined individuals and at the same time try to inculcate a robust, alternative set of personal standards and values based upon a morality forged from Christian precepts and historical military precedence; Standards which define how we should behave

and Values which determine the type of people we should be. They are a moral requirement; they have a functional utility and they are the foundation of teamwork. If any core value is compromised, the team and the mission are threatened.

The importance therefore of creating and encouraging a strong sense of personal identity and character forms the essential basis of much of the military and character training syllabus, for „We are what we are because of the things we have experienced, the language we speak, the people to whom we relate, the possessions we value; these are all part of a larger cultural environment which shapes the way our personhood expresses itself.” Because the Army is not immune from changes in society - and this is reflected in the attitudes and behaviour of those who enlist - the Army must be able to explain why our values and standards are more demanding of the individual and why such demands are equally necessary during peacetime as they are on operations.

The task at hand is to impart to the recruit an alternative lifestyle within a career choice which has as its basis an uncompromising acceptance of a set of Standards and Core values which in many instances are contrary to those which have been the basis of his/her civilian life.

Furthermore, this also involves the training staff in the task of developing in the recruit a strong sense of personal identity, robust character, renewed self confidence and personal pride commensurate with what it means to be a British soldier. This is particularly true if we acknowledge that “the importance of personal identity is such that without it a person is unable to handle the pressures of contemporary life and relate to others.”

The British Army has long identified that the individual and collective instances of breakdown in the personal military discipline of some soldiers in Iraq and indeed in other such instances by soldiers of other nations, needed close scrutiny.

In most, if not all cases, the soldiers were more than sufficiently trained in the exercise of the rules of engagement, the Law of Armed

Conflict and were fully appraised of their mandatory compliance with the Articles of The Geneva Convention. And yet mistakes were made.

Further close scrutiny of these instances revealed that in most cases, the errant behaviour was as a consequence of the changes in operational role of the soldiers concerned. One minute they find themselves engaged in some of the worst hand to hand combat operations known since the Korean War with all the attendant difficulties of experiencing the deaths and mutilations of colleagues and enemy alike; then they find themselves in the role of peacekeeping and POW detention with the additional pressures of close contact and confinement of those responsible for the death and injury of their colleagues. While their actions were both inexcusable and unprofessional they must be seen in the context in which these soldiers found themselves and the the attendant stresses and strains on even the most professional soldier that these circumstances presented.

In order that such instances of breaks in military discipline are not replicated, every officer and soldier now undergoes an annual series of mandatory training and testing on his/her knowledge of the Core Values.

This new training initiative, having been recently refined and further developed, is seen as a "Through Life" approach impacting on every facet of the soldier's life for the duration of their military service with the specific intention of combating poor leadership and ensuring best practice.

So what particular difficulty arises when the ethical or moral dimension is neglected in the identity and role of a professional soldier? As I have already stated above, if the Armed Forces have no ultimate standards by which to judge their actions or orders, we court moral and military disaster.

But moral education does not necessarily bring with it moral certainty, but it should help to clarify moral issues.

Robert Laing, a psychotherapist, wrote in the 1970's, "It appears that far more people today neither experience the presence of God, nor

the presence of his absence, but the absence of his presence“. From my experience and observations of soldiers within the Army, this can certainly be said to be true for soldiers.

So how do we as chaplains more authentically communicate the reality of God and the importance that personal faith and belief can play in the life of a combat soldier?

As I see it, the difficulty lies in the fact that we are speaking an unintelligible language that the vast majority of our soldiers do not understand. And why should they when organised religion, in such a sector ministry as military chaplaincy, has lost the ability to help people recognise the reality of God in their experience of themselves and their lives. Very often, as a Chaplain-Instructor, when I found that appeals to the prescriptive morality of organised denominational religion did not meet the challenge, it became necessary to respond to the recruit's innate morality.

This innate morality being their pre-religious God-awareness which characterised their tendency to think, feel and behave in a religious way with or without the support of specifically religious agencies.

We are fortunate that the Crown Forces are still imbued with a specifically Christian ethos and character. That ethos - supported wholeheartedly by the Chain of Command despite the personal faith or belief stance of it's Commanders - is still seen to be a very necessary contributing factor in maintaining the moral component of fighting effectiveness.

While the Conceptual Component relates to doctrine and how the Army thinks and the Physical Component relates to the training and equipping of its Forces, it is the Moral Component which places its emphasis on people. The crux of the issue lies in the question, how do we maintain our firm moral bearing within the Army, when our wider society's own moral compass may be spinning.

Much emphasis in recruit training relates to encouraging the notion of personal belief and faith as a motivating and supportive strength for a

combat soldier. Belief in self, in ones' training and colleagues, and most importantly in the military chain of command, is actively encouraged.

But hand in hand with the task of emphasising the role of personal belief is to be found an active participation in encouraging personal faith as another essential pre-requisite for military service. This is not as easy as one might imagine.

This is of course where we come in. After all, a chaplain must be “someone who, inspired by faith, creates a refuge for service personnel in the Armed Forces, so that a soldier stands up well as a human being“. But the reality is however, that for many soldiers, religion is simply something some people have and others do not. For a majority of serving personnel, faith in God and an association with denominational religion simply does not feature on their radar screens.

And why should it when the society from which they have come espouses the assumption that all moral ideas are subjective and relative; that they are all mere customs and conventions; that they have a purely instrumental, utilitarian purpose and that they are peculiar to specific individuals and societies.

Our incarnational ministry as chaplains must always have the courage to challenge the false assumptions and the moral relativism of those entering military service. We can best achieve this by the exercise of an authentic ministry of presence and example, because, “the only way a chaplain will penetrate this brotherhood is to be part of it.“

For us as chaplains, this means a shared participation in the process of making tangible, reinforcing and encouraging the core values in the lives of our soldiers.

Courage, both physical and moral; Respect for Others as enshrined in our legislation relating to Equality and Diversity;

Integrity, that essential thermometer which gauges the appropriateness of our actions; Loyalty, not blind, misguided or self seeking, but

rather uniting the individual to a sense of shared purpose; Discipline, both self discipline and our shared adherence to the lawful execution of our duties; and finally, Selfless Commitment, the ultimate test of a soldier even to the cost of his very life.

These values, espoused by the Military Covenant, underpins the relationship the soldier has with the Army. Everything the soldier does for the duration of his military service will be measured by that interrelation between the soldier and the Chain of Command.

They are seen by the chain of command as essential in the maintenance of the moral component of fighting effectiveness as well as a measure of the professionalism of their soldiers. In addition to their moral significance they are functionally indispensable.

The training, group organisations and the whole pattern of life for the professional soldier from the moment he enlists to the moment he leave the military, is designed in a deliberate effort to foster these Core Values, not just because they are morally desirable, but because they contribute to military efficiency and combat fighting power.

And while many within the military community might agree with the comment that religion is only of use to an army if it enhances morale and thus contributes to operational effectiveness; we would do well to remember the words of the English soldier, Samuel Ancell, who in 1779 said;

“Fine talking of God with a soldier whose trade and occupation is cutting throats. Divinity and slaughter sounds very well together, they jingle like a cracked bell in the hand of a noisy crier. My religion consists of a firelock, open torch-hole, good flint, well-rammed charge and seventy rounds of powder and ball. This is my military creed“.

The on-going task of living out the prophetic and incarnational expression of ministry in this unique community with all its attendant contradictions and difficulties will remain for us all our focussed intent as military chaplains.

Teaching what is good and true and encouraging those in our charge to have the courage to do what they instinctively know to be right, regardless of the task and the danger, and to do so without loss of their humanity - that is the challenge.

In that, we preserve all our souls.

Thank You.