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British Approaches to Military Obedience: Pragmatism, Operational Necessity, and Moral Dilemmas

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Introduction

The British Approach to military obedience is essentially practical; it is ambivalent, conditional and contingent, based on long experience of warfare, and a fundamental dislike of theory as such. In a speech[1] to cadets at the Sovereign's Parade at Sandhurst, the Duke of Edinburgh summarised the qualities required of the effective officer. He said that the most important of these is discipline, which entails obedience. But he went on to mention 'commonsense', by which he meant the willingness to modify or disregard orders which, according to the judgement of the officer concerned, no longer applied. He also called for consideration, the fact that orders should be framed in the light of calculation of what those about to receive those orders could and could not be expected to do.

In Spring 2000 the army produced two pamphlets on Values and Standards of the British Army. The pamphlet for soldiers mentions obedience only twice. The first citation says "you may be required to

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obey orders which put your life at risk" the second specifies "you must therefore obey all lawful orders you are given." The first of these sentences raises the *possibility* of an order entailing lethal danger. The second provides for disobedience of an order on legal grounds.[2] The officers' pamphlet does not use the word 'obedience' at all. It states that soldiers agree to subordination and to accept risks to life and limb when they are attested.[3] The text later remarks "commanders must be certain that their orders will be carried out," implying that obedience will not necessarily be automatic.[4]

The soldiers' pamphlet gives a number of reasons why the soldier should accept and practice self discipline. Self discipline, like courage, loyalty, commitment and professionalism is a virtue in itself, and is described as the primary cause of the good reputation of the soldier. It is based upon an obligation to selfless conduct, in the greater interests of comrades, commanders and the Nation. Above all, discipline is praised as the indispensable quality for success in the conduct of operations, an instrumental and consequential justification.[5] This definition is elaborated in the officers' edition. The raison d'être of the Army is success in the conduct of operations, and military doctrine "lays emphasis on the moral component the ability to get people to fight," and to do so when challenged by uncertainty, fear and fatigue.[6] The will to fight is dependent on collective solidarity—such teamwork is compelled by the Army ethos, a blend of commitment, self sacrifice and mutual trust.[7] Hence there is a need for higher values, an "overriding operational imperative to sustain team cohesion."[8] Shared values provide the motivation for each member of the team, in which performance "depends above all on good morale."[9] Morale is said to be connected to discipline and reinforced by it, but the discipline must be fair, governed by clear rules, as well as rigorous.[10] The overall tone of the pamphlet suggests that the solidarity and high morale produced by a voluntary acceptance of the ethos are the vital factors, to which discipline is an adjunct support[11]. Indeed, the officers' pamphlet remarks that when standards appear to be threatened "timely advice and informal action can prevent a situation developing to the point where it could impair the effectiveness of a service unit."[12] This indicates the clear and strong disinclination to the use of formal disciplinary proceedings, which are often regarded as symptoms of a failure of leadership.

Leadership commands a great deal more attention in the British Army than obedience. British officers want to be followed rather than obeyed. According to Michael Howard,

> Leadership is the capacity to inspire and motivate; to persuade people willingly to endure hardship, usually prolonged, and incur dangers, usually acute, that if left to themselves they would do their utmost to avoid.[13]

With specific reference to the British Army he states,

> In professional armies leadership is almost a function of built-in followership. Well disciplined troops are trained to do what they are told and have confidence in their equally professional leaders. Like well trained horses they [the soldiers] can carry even indifferent or incompetent riders.[14]

The last of these capacities is one for which many a young and inexperienced officer has had cause to be grateful.

Within the given context, what does 'obedience' mean? It is certainly not literal obedience, carried to the reductio ad absurdum, of the Good Soldier Schweik; nor is it mere abstention from what is forbidden. What is required is informed, intelligent, positive and creative obedience, in which behaviour is tailored to suit an overall purpose, not merely to comply with orders intended to serve it. In his introduction to the commanders' edition of Values and Standards, the Chief of the General Staff remarked that the values and standards discussed were intended to inspire soldiers rather than threaten them, that they were not commandments but a covenant amongst all members of the Army, and binding them and society.[15] The pamphlet goes on to explain that soldiers need "instruction in moral understanding," because it is ". . .vital that soldiers do not simply subscribe to a set of rules which they follow blindly, but rather understand why the rules are necessary."[16] This places a great burden of responsibility on every soldier, but that is not new. In 1934, when discussing the difficulties of colonial police operations, C.W. Gwynn remarked "The difficulty of codifying rules for the conduct of troops is obvious. The good sense of officers and sense of discipline must be relied upon."[17] Soldiers are advised that self discipline is expected of them, is the best sort of discipline, and will guide them when they have

to make decisions on their own. When required to act alone, they must show "moral courage always to do what [they] know is right." They cannot plead the Nuremberg defense "I was only obeying orders." They are required to follow local Civil Law, Military Law and the Law of Armed Conflict. But the specified *critical test* for their conduct is an instrumental one, "Have your actions or behaviour adversely impacted or are they likely to impact on the efficiency or operational effectiveness of the Army?"[18] This requirement is also within the traditional expectations of the Army. In Palestine during the Arab revolt of 1937-39, in one infantry battalion it was remarked, "all ranks learned to think for themselves, to act quickly, and to improvise."[19] During the Second World War, Field Marshal Montgomery was insistent that every soldier must know thoroughly his own role and its significance within the Master Plan.[20] In matters of training and the development of operational techniques and equipment, soldiers were expected to make a positive contribution to developments. In the Twenty-second Dragoons this was done by "weekly meetings . . . where ideas were discussed and sifted. It was a most democratic affair, anyone could offer suggestions as to how we might improve our tactics or devise some gadget which might help surmount some problem . . . ."[21] Advice to officers places a greater emphasis on the importance of the moral basis of morale. For them, morale, the keystone of fighting efficiently, consists of good equipment, training and administration, but "ultimately . . . conviction in what is being done."[22] The ideas above give soldiers and officers ample opportunity to practice disobedience for the most noble and excellent reasons, all depending on material circumstances and personal judgement.

One frequent source of difficulty in the practical application of obedience is the issue of who should be obeyed. At high levels this question raises important and delicate constitutional issues. Ever since the Restoration and Glorious Revolution of the Seventeenth Century, the principle of civil primacy has prevailed in British Constitutional Law. But submission to this principle is not unconditional on the part of the military. In reference to counter insurgency, C.W. Gwynn remarked, "Attempts to force the hand of the Government, or silent acquiescence in a mistaken employment of troops are equally blameworthy."[23]

In 1937, in Palestine, Major General Wavell demanded that the civil authorities give him clear orders, objectives and operational instructions

conducive to the restoration and maintenance of order.[24] In 1948, Montgomery confronted Attlee, the Prime Minister, about the Government's behavior in Palestine: "I challenged the existing policy . . . from the point of view of the right use of the Army, if we were not prepared to maintain law and order in Palestine, it would be better to get out, I could not agree to a lot of young British lads being killed needlessly."[25] The right of the civil government to command the obedience of the military is not recognized as absolute by the Army. On occasion, the military staffs consider it a matter of duty not merely to obey, but to exceed their orders, in the public interest, or for some greater cause. In Britain in Spring 1940, the official civil-military machinery for the planning and conduct of military operations was obviously inadequate, paralysed by its own complexity. In particular, there was no effective apparatus for the derivation of battle plans from strategic policy.[26] In order to remedy the deficiencies, the Joint Planning Committee began to draft operational directives in anticipation of legal and constitutional authorizations from the Chiefs of Staff and War Cabinet.[27] Because it was also apparent that the Chiefs of Staff Committee was too busy to act as an operational HQ, ad hoc unofficial staff organizations were created, such as an Anglo-French Inter-Service Planning Staff, and a Signals Board. The purpose of these bodies was to avoid clashes of policy in action, and attempt "coordination through liaison."[28]

During the conflict in the Falklands, similar frustrations at a lack of clear, appropriate orders, and a unified command structure emerged. Julian Thompson commented: "Beloved of NATO staffs because it panders to international sensitivities, 'coordination' can mean all things to all men and is no substitute for command. . . ," and he lamented the absence of an Overall Theatre Commander.[29]

British Staffs continue to exceed their remits and anticipate political instructions when they consider it right and necessary to do so. While exploring the lessons of the recent operations in Kosovo, the Defence Committee of the House of Commons noted a contradiction between the NATO policy that the North Atlantic Committee must sanction all contingency planning in advance (because the act of planning can in itself compromise policy), and the duty of military staffs to prepare for the worst, and inform political bodies of the options available to them. The

Committee discovered that "Informal military contingency planning, intended to inform and influence the process in NATO, had been going on in the UK prior to the formal decision to initiate planning within NATO."[30] The British Permanent Joint HQ began planning on 7 April 1998; authorization of the activity was issued on 6 May. The UK Military Representative to NATO told the Committee that "principal HQs are expected to undertake on their own initiative such activities, and to anticipate political decisions."[31] If the soldiers exceed their authority, and invade the territory of political deliberations, politicians sometimes go beyond their proper field of activity, and interfere in the conduct of military affairs, to the detriment of state interest.

In 1940, in his desperate desire for offensive action, Churchill insisted on preparations for active operations in Scandinavia, and, by force of personality and energy, crushed all effective opposition to his views.[32] The Chiefs of Staff and Joint Planners gave unanimous advice that, even if absent but "assumed" forces and resources became actual, the operations planned, "considered in themselves are not militarily sound."[33] Once the operations were under way, the War Cabinet intervened, against strong military advice, to insist on priority being given to North Norway, over Central Norway, on 9 April 1940. On 14 April, they reversed this order of priorities, but it was too late to save the Allied enterprise in Norway from catastrophe.[34]

Churchill continued to intervene directly in operational matters. With reference to plans for Operation SHINGLE, the landings at Anzio, which were carried through against the advice of Eisenhower, American General Mark Clark remarked "the Prime Minister had once again demonstrated his ability to force military decisions . . . ."[35] In reprise, Service Chiefs evaded or defied operational orders of which they disapproved. In Spring 1940 the Air Staff refused to deploy any substantial force of aircraft to Central Norway. They based their refusal on operational and strategic grounds, but also manifested a contempt for the judgement of politicians concerning their own sphere of air matters.[36] In addition to the Air Staff's resistence, the Royal Navy resisted proposals for a direct attack on Trondheim, which had a serious impact on the prospects of success for the Anglo-French land forces sent to Central Norway.[37]

The question of who was in legitimate command was more urgent and complicated for commanders of land forces that arrived in Norway in April 1940. Initially, the various contingents were to be independent forces receiving orders directly from the War Office.[38] Subsequently Lieutenant General H. R. S. Massy was given command of all Allied Land Forces in Central Norway. Having no staff as such, he improvised, taking officers from the HQ of V Corps and Military Operations 8 of the War Office.[39] In the meantime, uncertainties and conflicts over the source of command in Central Norway had materially assisted in the destruction of one British Brigade. In his original orders, Brigadier H. de R. Morgan of 148th Brigade was informed on 18 April 1940 that "Your force independent command under W.O. until further notice . . . instructions reference cooperation with Norwegians and reports to War Office unchanged."[40] However General Ruge, the Norwegian Chief of Staff, assumed that 148 Brigade was "under command rather than in support," and issued orders to Morgan. Morgan protested against the orders, Ruge insisted, and said that if 148 Brigade did not obey orders from the Norwegian Second Division, he would order the Norwegian Army to cease fire. Morgan appealed to the Chief of the Imperial General Staff (CIGS) for a clarification of his status and the chain of command. The signal sent in return by the CIGS repeated that he should "cooperate with the Norwegians," and did not address the vital question of command relations. Under great pressure, lacking support from his own seniors, Morgan gave way, and accepted orders from the Second Division. Within a short while his brigade had been dispersed, defeated in detail, and reduced to an ineffective remnant.[41]

Subsequently General Paget was sent out to command the Land Forces in Central Norway. In his case, better arrangements were made. His instructions stated "you will not be under the orders of the CinC Norwegian Army," and on 26 April 1940, he was given command of Norwegian troops in his area of operations. This ensured effective and useful cooperation.[42] Even at relatively low levels, commanders and officers have taken a robust negative view of orders which they thought were issued by persons who were constitutionally or technically incompetent. During the campaign in Northwest Europe in 1940, a British Brigade was sent to Boulogne. Once in place, the Brigade Commander, Brigadier Fox-Pitt, received orders from three separate

sources. Churchill, by then Prime Minister, told him his brigade must die in position to set an example of heroic resistance to the French Army, Government and people. Ironside, the Chief of Imperial General Staff, ordered him to use his own judgement as to what to do. Lord Gort, Commander of the B.E.F., instructed him to hold Boulogne as long as it was practical and prudent to do so, evacuate as many allied troops and civilian refugees as was possible via the port, and withdraw his Brigade by the same route without undue loss. Brigadier Fox-Pitt followed the order of Gort (and Ironside), and, having held Boulogne in the face of probing attacks for some days, got his brigade away in reasonable condition. He considered the orders from the Prime Minister invalid, because they were from outside the proper chain of command. He also believed them to be militarily incompetent, and immoral, because they could have caused a great and avoidable loss of life to no good purpose. He believed that the fate of the brigade sent to Calais, which did fight until the last round, and was overrun and lost, proved him right.[43]

There could be circumvention of orders at regimental level as well. When the Twenty-second Dragoons were converted into a Flail-tank unit, equipped to perform the dangerous and unglamorous task of clearing mines, one of the squadron commanders refused to accept the change of role and its implications. He ordered a continuation of training for the former role as a medium tank unit. But, in accordance with the order from higher levels, and with their own sense of responsibility, his second-in-command continued to train tank crews of the squadron in their new work. Considerable subterfuge was employed in order to evade Squadron orders in the cause of the higher purpose and superior orders.[44]

In summary, to answer the question, who must be obeyed? The British view is that it all depends on the circumstances and quality of those involved. Rank in itself, political or military, is not sufficient to require obedience. Status is not always accompanied by the necessary authority. In particular, many new officers undergo a period of tutelage at the hands of experienced NCOs or private soldiers before they can actually exercise the command to which they are appointed.[45]

A particular question arises when, through the operation of contingency, there is no one available to give orders to a soldier or officer. What should he do if there is no source of orders? In action, the

old doctrine of "follow the last order" can be lethally inappropriate, offensive to common sense and the instinct for survival.

An example of a situation when there was no source of orders is the following. In 1940, Captain Ward, the most junior officer in the HQ staff of the Sixty-ninth Brigade awoke one morning to find himself in sole charge of the formation. The Brigade Commander and all other officers had vanished. He was unable to gain contact with any higher formation; the HQ signals were all unserviceable. As the sounds and other signs of battle drew nearer, he was asked by his NCOs what he intended to do. He was, formally, in command of the whole brigade. In the event he took advice from the senior Battalion Commander, an officer of great experience from the Great War and after, and issued his orders accordingly.[46]

In September 1944, Lieutenant Jalland led his platoon across the Albert Canal towards Gheel. He started just before dusk, and by morning was in a farm, cut off from all contact with his company or other platoons. Although he heard sounds of battle behind his position, to the south, he decided, on the basis of his understanding of the battalion plan, to advance northwards, which he did. He deployed his platoon in and around another farm, discovered he was behind a firm defensive position of the enemy, and settled down to wait. His decision was based on a strong notion of duty and first principles.[47]

There are contrasting examples of cases in which a rigid adherence to orders or disciplinary procedures produced results detrimental to operational efficiency.

In 1918 a Welsh NCO in a formation commanded by Francis Crozier was in charge of a forward post which came under sudden intense bombardment. The NCO withdrew his party temporarily, then returned to the post to repair and hold it once the bombardment was over. But he had taken this action without a formal order or permission to withdraw, and his colonel, a fanatical supporter of strict discipline, sent him for Court Martial on a charge of cowardice, which carried the death sentence. Crozier, who was renowned for ruthless conduct in cases of emergency, tore up the Court Martial papers and commended the Welshman on his use of initiative.[48]

In 1940, preparing for defensive action at Béthune, the commander of D Company of the Irish Fusiliers told one of his subalterns to find a

"good cellar" as a location for the command post. The subaltern duly chose a cellar belonging to a wine merchant, well stocked with wines and spirits. Fortunately, it was also deep and bomb proof. Later in the action the Company Commander was aware that the battalion plan was to withdraw by stealth under cover of darkness. But he would not abandon his position without reading a written order first. Such an order was delivered, written in indelible pencil, but was not legible until dawn. Because of this rigidity the company had to break contact and withdraw across open ground in daylight.[49]

During the same campaign an officer of the DCLI, who had withdrawn without orders from an isolated defensive post on the Scheldt, because he was out of contact and wished to preserve his anti-tank gun from capture, was put in front of a Court Martial. Fortunately for him, his reputation for reliability was such that the charges against him were thrown out.[50]

During the Italian Campaign, Captain Spencer, who was serving with a battalion of the DCLI, observed to his battalion company that orders for an attack across the river Ronco were no longer militarily practicable, because of a dramatic change in the weather and the arrival of substantial enemy reinforcements. He was accused of questioning orders and forced to carry on. The attack went ahead and was a disastrous failure.[51]

Rigid discipline could cause less dramatic but significant harm in other contexts. For example, Major Farrell was amazed when his expression of a contrary opinion on a minor administrative matter led to a confrontation with his CO, and a threat to send him home for questioning orders.[52] An officer with the Welsh Guards observed that strict enforcement of an order to do foot drill during the winter spent at Nijmegen had a very bad effect on morale.[53]

If rigid control and literal obedience can have such bad effects in action, is there any role for strict enforced discipline? In the modern British Army such discipline has been used habitually in the process of training, particularly the basic training of new recruits. Once discipline has been instilled by external pressures, and those unable to accept it, or able to resist the process, have been weeded out, soldiers are expected to internalize the control. Such control is regarded as the quality that is essential to effectiveness in further training, and in action. During the Great War, Major General Nugent remarked to the officers of his

division, "[i]t is the spirit of discipline which enables you and the men you have to lead to face losses, to go steadily to your front and to confront difficulties and dangers which would probably have frightened you into a lunatic asylum eight months ago."[54] Crozier took a more desolate view; he remarked "the military code exists to punish individuals as a lesson to others."[55] His view was that in extreme circumstances only fear of the direst consequences, physical or emotional death, would keep frightened men under control.[56]

During the Great War the British Army did use fear of death by firing squad as a means of compulsion, but sparingly. Between 1914 and 1920, 3,080 British and Imperial soldiers were sentenced to death, and of these 346 were executed. On the Western Front 284 were shot; of these only five were punished specifically for "disobedience."[57] The purpose of these judicial killings was quite explicit, and was made clear to troops by publication; it was to reinforce discipline by example.[58] Policy changed after the Great War. In 1930 the death penalty for disobedience and other serious military offences was abolished, despite the opposition of senior officers such as Allenby and Plumer. During the Second World War the Army Council called for restoration of the death penalty, but in vain.[59] Officers who served at junior levels in the Second World War tended to reject the death penalty as a means of compelling obedience or stiffening the resolve to fight.[60]

Fear of death could also be applied in other ways, by "informal disciplinary procedures." During the Great War Crozier, and other officers, shot out of hand many men in order to hold the Line in times of emergency. He believed that in extreme circumstances only such drastic action could cure panic and save the Army and Nation from defeat. There could be no exceptions to this rule. He wrote, "I expected to be shot myself—if I ran away . . . . "[61] He conceded that in legal and moral terms such action was murder, but he considered it a necessary evil.[62] He also believed that, in normal times: "The moral appeal is generally stronger than the armed threat . . . ," but took the view that in time of panic and emergency, reason and morality were insufficient.[63] Similarly, drastic measures were applied on occasion during the Second World War, but usually by officers with experience of the Great War. In Normandy in 1944 the 6 DWR broke and ran after a prolonged bombardment which had killed or wounded most of their officers and NCOs. In an attempt to

stem the tide of panic, the CO used his revolver.[64] Further to the rear, Captain Bickersteth of the Royal Artillery stood and watched, astonished, as a grizzled ancient officer of his battery shot down the fleeing soldiers. Bickersteth had never heard of the possibility of soldiers running away in all his training.[65]

Within units, NCOs often checked disorder or enforced obedience by less terminal physical sanctions. Crozier was opposed to "bullying," but favoured the free use of "public school discipline."[66] During the Second World War, experienced NCOs were observed to check and steady nervous soldiers who inclined to panic in action by cuffing them and physically shoving them back to their posts.[67]

But in Machiavellian terms, the Army prefers to use Love rather than Fear as a means to gain obedience. The officers' version of "values and standards" states that loyalty, the binding element in the Army, cannot be assumed, but must be *earned* by leaders. Leaders attract loyalty by "commitment, self-sacrifice, courage, professionalism,"[68] a mixture of traditional heroic virtues and acquired competence. Commanders must also be decent and just in treating their subordinates,[69] and lead them by example,[70] *not* drive them on for fear of punishment.

Montgomery regarded good leaders—those competent in their work, so as to avoid failure in battle and minimise casualties—as the essential element in the success of his own armies.[71] Michael Howard remarked that in the Second World War "[g]enerals were professional, brisk, competent . . . ."[72]

This professional competence developed during the war. Howard himself observed that in 1939 the outbreak of war against Germany was regarded with dismay by many officers as an interruption to the normal life of "soldiering—that agreeable and gentlemanly occupation."[73]

In the summer of 1938 Charles Farrell, fresh from an alarming visit to Germany, was "amazed at the Olympian calm and other military inactivity" in Chelsea Barracks.[74] Subsequently, in the Training Battalion of the Scots Guards, he did very little tactical training, and little of that was of any relevance to the realities of war that he experienced later.[75] The favoured archetype of the Sporting Gentleman Amateur contrived to survive in the Army, despite the increasing predominance of ruthless professionals like Montgomery.[76] Even today, the archetype is alive and well as the desired model of style and outward appearances.

If formal discipline and threats of death are not used, what means of obtaining obedience or attracting compliance are available to the commander? The answer depends, largely, upon the level of command, in regard to the means available and their effectiveness. At the highest levels, those of Allied Command, British commanders had to rely on persuasion, using tact and diplomacy, because they had no means of applying compulsion. The politics of personality, resembling Court politics, were important. The lack of obedience and discipline amongst senior commanders often led to disruption of strategy and operations.

In Italy during the Second World War, Field Marshal Alexander found it impossible to control General Mark Clark, commander of the American 5th Army. Alexander always approached controversial matters with as much courtesy and tact as possible. Clark recorded in his memoirs, that when he had made a radical change to the orders issued to General Lucas at Anzio, Alexander indicated that he *did not agree* with my order to Lucas rescinding the instructions to VI Corps.[77] In the course of a subsequent discussion about the employment of reinforcements, "Alexander merely listened to my argument and then concurred. He was . . . always extremely considerate of the other fellow's point of view."[78] Alexander also let Clark have his way over continuing an attack across the Rapido with the US II Corps, even though he was himself sure that the proposed crossing would fail.[79] Subsequently, in April 1944, Clark ignored Alexander's clear intention to use the US VI Corps to cut the line of retreat of the German 10th Army, in order to follow his personal inclination to capture Rome. In order to pursue this personal triumph, he overrode the objections of his own subordinate, General Truscott, then commanding VI Corps, and deliberately deceived Alexander, his superior, concerning his own actions.[80] Alexander was enraged, but made no effort to correct or remove Clark.[81] In defending his own actions in his memoirs, Clark claimed to have acted in accordance with superior orders from political quarters, and specifically from Churchill, and with the acquiescence of "Jumbo" Wilson, the Allied Commander in Chief of the Mediterranean Theatre.[82]

An Allied Commander at lower level, General Anders of the Polish Corps in Italy, found Wilson similarly amenable, always willing to listen with sympathy and understanding.[83] General Leese, commanding 8th Army in Italy, was similarly diffident. In March 1944 he proposed to

Anders that the Polish Corps should attack Monte Cassino, and, after a pause for reflection, Anders agreed.[84] Leese left Anders to devise his own Corps plan for the conduct of the operation.[85]

Earlier in spring Leese had felt compelled to reprove Anders for complaining that the 8th Army was publishing Russian material in the formation newspaper. Leese sent a telegram saying, "I have to point out to you how *superfluous* it is for a corps commander to express in public any opinions concerning the political situation . . . ."[86] In Northwest Europe, Field Marshal Montgomery had to show similar tact and restraint when dealing with his American subordinate. In June 1944 he tried to persuade Bradley, commanding the US 21st Army, to attack Cherbourg and Coutances simultaneously. The cautious and prudent Bradley resisted, and Montgomery had to accept failure.[87] He was no saint himself in the matter of compliance with superior orders. He was insubordinate in his behaviour and attitude to Eisenhower, whom he regarded as inexperienced and, thus, incompetent.[88] Like Clark, he resorted to subterfuge and deception in order to get his own way.[89]

In this respect, Montgomery was not typical of the senior British officer. In general, they accepted the idea of subordination, even if it could lead to undesirable consequences. In October 1943, General McCreery, commanding the British X Corps in Italy protested against orders given him by Clark in these terms:

> I want to make it plain as the commander responsible for British troops . . . and with my experience against Rommel in Egypt, that this is the most difficult job I've faced . . . . *We accept your order, of course*, and we will go all out, but I have to say that *I am embarrassed* when an American gives British troops orders that we don't like.[90]

In dealing with their own subordinate officers, British commanders showed a general fear of embarrassment or controversy, and an assumption of good intent and sound judgement on their behalf. These tendencies were particularly strong at high levels during the Great War. During the Gallipoli operations in 1915, "Hamilton fell foul of the unofficial command doctrine, that the superior commander must set broad aims leaving the operational commanders to actually fight the battle,. . .

did not exercise the superior commander's ultimate prerogative to intervene if things are obviously going wrong."[91]

The convention of avoiding direct or immoderate disapproval of subordinates was a powerful one. After some serious difficulties with his officers in training, it was recorded that "Nugent . . . admits to being so furiously angry with his subordinates that he did not dare speak to them for several days for fear of what he might say."[92] During the Third Battle of Ypres, in 1917, Field Marshal Haig gave firm, persistent and well founded advice to his 5th Army Commander, General Gough. Gough ignored or resisted the advice,[93] but Haig did not issue direct and formal orders to him, because he "believed that Army Commanders should be left to run their own battles."[94] But, eventually, as the battle continued to go badly, "Haig, who did not like to intervene directly, took the drastic step of replacing Gough."[95] The practice of allowing autonomy to subordinates persisted during the Second World War, but was not uncontested. Alexander was inclined to support the hierarchy, but also to discourage interference by senior officers in the conduct of operations by formation commanders. He was always the gentleman.[96] Officers with a traditional outlook respected this autonomy down to relatively low levels. During the course of the operations, around Boulogne in 1940, an engineer officer who had been ordered not to demolish a bridge over the Canche without further instructions, blew up the bridge prematurely. When summoned to explain to Brigadier Fox-Pitt why he had carried out this prohibited action, he replied "It seemed a good idea at the time." The Brigadier paused for a moment, then told him to "carry on."[97]

Brigadier Stanier, who commanded an assault brigade on D-day, spent most of his time in the field visiting battalion and company HQs, to taste the atmosphere, give reassurance, and offer assistance if required. He rarely gave direct orders as such, but expected his expressed intentions, given verbally, to be carried out to good effect by his unit commanders.[98] During the difficult assault landing on D-day he did take control of one battalion which had lost all its Senior Officers and was in serious trouble, but handed over responsibility to the new CO as soon as possible.[99] In turn, he expected to be left alone by General Graham, Commanding 50th Division, unless he was in need of assistance.[100]

Montgomery was an exception to the old rule. When he arrived in the Middle East he found 8th Army had formation commanders who were

highly independent in mind and spirit. According to Michael Howard, "they were highly resistant to control from above, ruling their divisions almost like feudal baronies."[101] Montgomery rejected this feudalism, in favour of the principle of absolute monarchy, so long as he was the monarch. After the breakthrough in the Battle of Alamein, General Lumsden, resisted orders to advance rapidly through the Axis minefields in order to complete the destruction of the German and Italian forces. Lumsden was concerned to avoid causalities. So was Montgomery, but he was convinced that, on occasion, casualties must be endured for the sake of gaining a critical operational advantage. Lumsden persisted in his obduracy, and evaded orders to meet Montgomery to discuss the matter. Montgomery sacked him.[102]

Whilst in the Mediterranean Theatre, Montgomery recruited and formed a retinue of officers whom he felt he could trust to be biddable and efficient. He took them with him to Northwest Europe, to 21 Army Group. He was a firm believer in the importance of maintaining control, what he called "grip," at all levels below Army. Corps commanders were expected to do as they were told. As Army Group Commander, he often issued instructions directly to Corps or Division Commanders, ignoring the formal chain of command. Commanders who disappointed him were dismissed.[103]

His chosen senior subordinates were similarly intolerant of dissidence or failure, and exercised as much "grip" of their own as possible.[104] But Montgomery was also inclined to conduct his business with selected and trustworthy officers, even very junior ones, in an informal manner. Discussions of a free and open nature usually preceded the issue of verbal orders with reference to a map-board.[105]

The practice of purposeful liberty at conferences and orders groups continued after 1945. During the Falklands conflict, Julian Thompson issued verbal orders for his Brigade landing.[106] At his orders groups he would give each unit a mission "what was to be done, but not how," in a style that made each meeting a "business like but family occasion." In between times, he went visiting in a "Rover Group," in a way very similar to that of Brigadier Stanier in 1944.[107]

At the most basic level of command, especially in the infantry (the most dangerous and indispensable arm of service), obedience is based on an exchange of favours. Hierarchy is accepted and consolidated by an

inherent sense of reciprocity, that is ancient in its origins.[108] Because it is virtually impossible to apply direct physical coercion on the battlefield, the soldier must obey because he wishes to do so.[109] This willing subordination is produced by various factors. Commanders must provide leadership based on the traditional heroic virtues.[110]

In recent conflicts, an indifference to personal danger and tranquillity in the face of possible catastrophe has been of great importance. Michael Howard remarked that during a critical stage in the bridgehead at Anzio, everyone benefited from a visit by Alexander. "Providing a calm, gentle, friendly presence . . . urbane normality was very much the style."[111] General Tyacke remembers that during some extremely difficult and dangerous phases of the fighting in 1940, the Brigade Commander would often appear, standing in the open, wearing his red hat, to convey a sense of unconcern and confidence. In Normandy, Brigadier Stanier enjoyed going right forward, beyond the outposts, to conduct reconnaissances for battalion or company commanders who were too busy to do them for themselves. In the Royal Artillery, battery commanders took their turn to act as forward observation officers, in order to share the burden of risk, as brothers in arms with their most junior officers, and the soldiers who accompanied them.[112]

A similar example was expected in the Falklands, and usually inspired the desired result. In the final attack on the ridges above Port Stanley, Major Kiszley led the remnants of a platoon to the crest, in the midst of a confused action at night. On arrival, he discovered one of the soldiers had followed him all the way despite having no ammunition. Upon being asked why, the soldier replied "Because you *asked* me to."[113] But heroism in itself, whilst indispensable to successful leadership, is not enough. During the Great War officers recognised the importance of looking after their men. General Nugent stated "Officers . . . must work on the principle that there is nothing too small to worry over if it tends to the comfort, health and fighting efficiency of your men."[114] Major Farrell, whilst unimpressed by the tactical training he was given in 1938, was strongly impressed by the strong emphasis on the primary importance of the welfare of the soldiers.[115]

Willing compliance was also strengthened and encouraged by a sense of identity, cohesion and solidarity based, especially in the infantry and armoured troops, on the regiment.[116] Major Farrell remarked: "the

regimental or battalion unit was the best and clearest focus for an essentially citizen army."[117] Membership of a basic unit had great psychological effect. During the Great War, in the 22 Royal Fusiliers, "platoons were united in loyalty to their officers and to the good name of the 22 Royal Fusiliers. Solidarity formed an excellent basis for . . . a disciplinary system based on 'self' rather than imposed discipline . . . men, in return for paternal care and effective leadership offered loyalty and obedience." Within such a unit, there was no need for any emphasis on rank, status, or formality in order to obtain fighting efficiency.[118]

The sense of solidarity was produced to a great extent by collective training. Montgomery and Slim both regarded morale as the factor of supreme importance to military effectiveness, and training as the means to produce it.[119] This was important also to make leaders competent and articulate. In the Second World War, soldiers wanted to be sure that if they were to accept a high risk of death or injury, they would do so for a good reason. Montgomery was very aware of the democratic insistence on explanation and information in the army, and took steps to cater for it. Michael Howard recalled,

> We never felt that our lives were being pointlessly thrown away. Attacks were always carefully prepared . . . perhaps most important we were always told why they were taking place and what they were expect to achieve . . . we felt we were being treated as intelligent human beings, and were expected to treat those under our own command accordingly.[120]

The requirement to *explain* the purpose of orders could arise in the most pressing circumstances. While landing on Gold beach on D-day, Lieutenant Jalland had to persuade his platoon not to shoot German soldiers who were attempting to surrender, on the grounds that it would make the enemy fight harder.[121]

Operational efficiency still drives the need for informing the soldier. Julian Thompson stated "Every marine and soldier must know what the Brigade task was, . . . so that if leaders at any level become casualties, sub units would press on to their objectives. Soldiers, and infantry especially, need to know the plan in detail."[122] During the Second World War, if officers could not inform their troops what they were doing, and explain the purpose and style of the operations in progress, efficiency was

degraded. In extreme cases, morale failed, leading to a collapse of discipline, to desertion, submission to capture, and hostility to officers. These consequences all occurred in 148th Brigade and 15th Brigade in central Norway in Spring 1940.[123]

Soldiers who felt that they were being asked to do things that were unnecessarily risky, or just unreasonable, could react by vigorous refusal, open disrespect for their commanders, or worse. In 1945, shortly after the end of hostilities in Europe, Major Farrell's battalion organized a drill course for all NCOs. The NCOs all applied to return to the ranks rather than attend the course. In the face of this solid defiance, the battalion HQ cancelled the proposed course.[124]

Earlier, in Normandy, Captain Hammerton's squadron of the 22 Dragoons had been persistently and grievously provoked by the Commander's insistence on formal relations and "bullshit" in the field. When they heard that he had been badly wounded in an air raid "the Troop cheered, which was embarrassing but not unexpected."[125] In spring 1945 the 22 Dragoons had a new colonel, who "had made himself a reputation as a man who was prepared to use us for any operation, no matter how dangerous." One morning Captain Hammerton had to physically restrain his gunner from opening fire on the Colonel with the turret machine gun.[126]

It is difficult to establish how many commanders were killed by design in the guise of battle accidents. But there are many cases of refusal to obey orders as given, usually resulting in negotiation and compromise, often for excellent reasons and with benign or beneficial results. There have been various grounds for such behaviour.

The requirements of exemplary heroic leadership in action, accompanied by autonomous judgement of military efficiency, inspired General Crozier to ignore formal and trenchant orders to remain safely in his command post during an attack.[127] Similarly, in armoured units in the Second World War, troop commanders were under orders to station their own tanks second in advancing to contact, in order to improve their chances of surviving first contact and maintaining control. Troop commanders habitually led their columns from the front, as a matter of essential example to their soldiers. Tank commanders usually ignored orders to close their turrets when going into action, on grounds of military efficiency, despite the greatly increased risk that results from doing so.[128]

Tank crewmen regularly carried out "field modifications" to their vehicles, such as removing speed governors from their engines, in the face of stern official prohibitions, on the same grounds.[129]

Officers often modified inappropriate orders on grounds of practicality and the safety of the soldiers for whom they were responsible. In spring 1940, a battalion of the DCLI were ordered to hold a stretch of canal bank around the Dunkirk perimeter. The nature of the ground would have made deployment to hold the embankment itself difficult and hazardous. In fact, the battalion deployed to a number of farms on mounds to the rear of the canal, from which they could dominate the ground.[130]

During the operations in the Suez Canal zone in 1956, a battalion of the parachute regiment was given imperative orders to stop all operations at midnight on a certain day. Yet, the Battalion Commander continued to advance until he had found a safe defensible position in which to deploy his soldiers.[131]

Considerations of personal honour and military etiquette have also moved officers to refuse to question superiors. On two occasions General O'Connor refused peremptory demands from Montgomery to make critical reports on senior officers whom the Field Marshal wished to dismiss. On the second occasion, O'Connor threatened to resign rather than betray his colleague.[132]

Soldiers have also been moved to disobedience, positive and negative, by questions of conscience, sometimes instinctive, at other times a matter of ratiocination. General Crozier was unable to continue as a sniper. He felt: "the game was dirty . . . cold calculated murder of defenseless men was diabolical . . . , " it inspired a "sense of guilt, that conscience-stricken feeling of killing a man who at the moment was not menacing you."[133] He was not alone. Private Razzell, fully trained in stalking and shooting, could not bring himself to kill unsuspecting enemy soldiers. However, after the sniping officer explained to him that it would be sufficient to wound enemy soldiers, and that his victims and their mothers would be grateful to him for removing them from front line duty, he carried on quite happily.[134]

Troops deployed on internal security or counter-insurgency operations can be tested to the limits of obedience, and beyond. General Crozier observed of the troubles in Ireland: "The British Army in Ireland

behaved well in the most trying circumstances . . . the British Government . . . raised a division of ex-officers . . . and allocated to them . . . the task of organized murder, which disciplined soldiers would not and never could, contemplate."[135] The soldier's sense of justice, of right and wrong, would not permit an act in support of a morally bad policy.[136]

Soldiers deployed to Palestine in the difficult times of 1945-48 also suffered serious provocations, from both the local communities. This challenge to their presence and conduct produced a strong inclination to self-control, a sense of great satisfaction to all who stood up to the test.[137] This determination was strengthened by a belief that the object of their presence, to keep the peace, was a universal good.[138] Conscience can also impel troops to take action in a disobedient manner. In April 1948, just prior to British withdrawal from Palestine, all troops were under orders to remain in camp and not to intervene in any way in the developing communal fighting. But units found it impossible to remain inactive whilst women, children, and old men were at risk of massacre, so they intervened on a number of occasions.[139] Similar considerations drove the behavior of the Cheshire Group during its operations in Bosnia in the 1990s. The Cheshires interpreted their mission as being to save lives in their area of responsibility, and this idea of the mission overrode considerations based on formal process, represented in the detailed provisions of UN mandates, and Rules of Engagement. This was a form of practical wisdom in action.[140]

Issues are generally clearer in conventional warfare. During the Second World War one British Officer overtly refused to obey orders on grounds derived from Just War theory. He argued that Allied plans for offensive operations in Northwest Europe would inflict on the innocent civil community damage disproportionate to the military advantage gained. His seniors were bemused by his reasoning, but not outraged or disgusted by it. He was cashiered and imprisoned, but not rejected by his family and friends, nor condemned by his own commanding officer.[141]

Even in conventional warfare, difficult moral dilemmas can arise. In the British Army, these can be settled by consultation. Lieutenant Jalland was isolated, with his platoon, behind enemy lines, in the vicinity of Gheel. At one point, he saw men of his own battalion being led off as prisoners of war. The question arose of whether the platoon should

attempt to rescue them from captivity, and accept the risk that the prisoners might perish in the attempt. Jalland felt unable to decide on his own; after a short discussion a collective decision was reached not to attempt a rescue.

An even more complicated problem emerged later, when some enemy stretcher bearers wandered into the platoon location and were captured. They said that the wounded enemy soldier they were carrying would die if not conveyed to a nearby dressing station in the immediate future. They also offered to give their word of honour not to reveal the presence of the British platoon to their own side. Once again, the Lieutenant felt bound to consult his soldiers. They decided that in the interests of humanity, they must take the risk of trusting the honour of the enemy party, and allowed them to proceed.[142]

It is difficult to draw general conclusions from the material and considerations presented in this paper. The British Army takes pride in being a volunteer regular force, and in maintaining a certain standard of discipline. But it is evident that discipline is not more literal obedience. Obedience is yielded up to authority, but it is a qualified and conditional obedience, which those in command should always bear in mind.

Notes

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