

# **Student Leadership Portfolio**

*Learning in Spite of Myself:*

*Family, Integrity, and Institutional Distrust*

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# 1 My Journey to the Course

This chapter reflects on the formative experiences that have shaped my professional and personal development to date. It traces my early career, operational service, leadership evolution, and intellectual influences, highlighting what has changed about me, what has remained consistent and what these patterns suggest about my character and leadership style.

My journey to the course began in 2003 when I entered the Cadet School. After twenty one months I was commissioned as an Infantry Officer in the 3rd Infantry Battalion at Stephens Barracks, Kilkenny. From the outset my path was shaped by service and academic choices. At around twenty two years of age I entered a period of rapid maturing. I completed the Gold Gaisce (President's Award), taught myself German through audio materials, travelled and committed to structured learning. This followed a phase of difficult behaviour which proved formative. The period from twenty one to twenty three altered my trajectory for the better. A further decisive moment was the choice to pursue physics rather than arts. That decision enabled me to complete a Master's by research in physics. Although I had no ambition to join the Ordnance Corps, this academic path created that opening.

Early postings included the External Education and Training Branch in Defence Forces Headquarters. I later completed the Ordnance Young Officers Course and qualified as an Ordnance Technical Officer in 2016. Appointments in the Ordnance School and the Ordnance Company broadened my technical and instructional base. Operational service took me overseas to Lebanon in 2012 and later to Syria as a bomb disposal officer. Syria was formative, not only for technical practice but for team building, mentoring officers and handling personalities. I was fortunate to deploy during a period of high operational tempo, likely performing more live Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) and Improvised Explosive Device Disposal (IEDD) tasks than peers. These experiences enhanced credibility but also reinforced my scepticism of institutional processes that lagged behind op-

erational reality. With hindsight I see that my own sense of pride in operational activity may have limited empathy for colleagues who did not have the same exposure, which is an important reminder that perspective-taking is part of leadership.

A further transformation occurred when I was appointed Company Commander overseas in 2021–2022. In my promotion interview I argued that the hardest part of higher command would be managing officers rather than soldiers. The board disagreed, yet in practice I was proved correct. Some officers were highly competent, others incompetent, many disillusioned. Each required a different style of leadership. This was intensely difficult yet confirmed that command is as much about managing personalities and expectations as it is about tactics. While my reflection highlights personal resilience, organisational research stresses that effective mission command depends not only on individual adaptability but also on institutional trust (Bachmann et al. 2015). I also recognise that from the perspective of subordinates, my interventions may not always have appeared consistent, underlining the importance of clarity when balancing support with challenge.

My leadership style has evolved considerably since I was a young Lieutenant. Then I intervened in every minor transgression, listening too closely to corporals and sergeants. Today I intervene less, focusing on what matters. Silence may represent maturity, however it can also be neglect. Over time I have become more situational in approach. I avoid micromanagement, provide broad guidance and allow autonomy. I encourage initiative, support learning through experience and take pride in the development of others. This situational flexibility aligns with leadership theory on adaptive practice (Heifetz and Linsky 2002), though my high assertiveness and low expressiveness (Emergenetics 2025) make balance difficult. A psychometric bias towards a rational analytical preference risks underplaying social dynamics; I must therefore compensate by deliberately weighting relational factors and inviting feedback from those with contrasting styles.

Another key moment came when I pursued and won a redress of wrongs against the organisation. The process exposed the institution at its worst but also confirmed that integrity can and must be defended even against the system itself. This strengthened my belief that credibility is grounded not only in competence but also in fairness and con-

sistency. However, while personal victory reaffirmed my resolve, it risked deepening cynicism towards the wider organisation. To mitigate this, I must avoid assuming that organisational failings are inevitable and instead contribute to reform through constructive engagement.

Another formative element of my professional development has been my custodianship of the EOD/IEDD manuals, instructions and standard operating procedures of the Defence Forces. Over the last eight years I have redesigned, rewritten and published every EOD syllabus and course in service. This work has gone beyond academic writing to the supervision of training delivery: as syllabi were turned into courses and those courses began running, I continued to oversee their execution. Even when I was not formally posted to the Ordnance School, I maintained responsibility for modernising instructions and updating procedures. This culminated in the current Defence Forces Explosive Ordnance Disposal Instructions (Irish Defence Forces 2022), which represent for me the consolidation of nearly a decade of development.

In undertaking this work I drew not only on operational experience but also on a body of influential literature that shaped my technical, ethical and leadership approach. These texts have underpinned my thinking on how best to prepare EOD operators for both the technical and human dimensions of their work.

- *The Long Walk* — Castner, B.
- *The Development of the British Approach to Improvised Explosive Device Disposal in Northern Ireland* — Cochrane, B.
- *Painting the Sand* — Hughes, K.
- *Eight Lives Down* — Hunter, C.
- *Extreme Risk* — Hunter, C.
- *IRA: The Bombs and the Bullets* — Oppenheimer, A. R.
- *Bombs Have No Pity* — Styles, G.

## *1 My Journey to the Course*

In recent years I have received niche IEDD training through an international project. Prior to the course I was the national expert for this programme. The technical instruction was excellent, yet the formative element was a hostage handling course, which demonstrated that I possess genuine skill in handling persons in crisis. This underscored that leadership is not confined to technical competence but extends into human resilience and empathy under stress.

A further dimension of my development has been shaped by sustained reading. For over twenty years I have examined the origins of totalitarianism and the ethical causes of violence. This has been a long-term intellectual interest which continues to inform my professional outlook. While deployed to Lebanon in 2021 I extended this focus by reading extensively on jihadist ideology and the rise of ISIS. Together these works form the backbone of my ethical outlook and my understanding of how violence is rationalised by states and movements alike.

The following books are of particular note in shaping my perspective on the origins of totalitarianism and violence:

- *The Origins of Totalitarianism* — Arendt, H.
- *On Violence* — Arendt, H.
- *Eichmann in Jerusalem* — Arendt, H.
- *The Human Condition* — Arendt, H.
- *On Killing* — Grossman, D.
- *Mein Kampf* — Hitler, A.
- *The Face of Battle* — Keegan, J.
- *The Communist Manifesto* — Marx, K. & Engels, F.
- *The Soviet Tragedy: A History of Socialism in Russia, 1917–1991* — Malia, M.
- *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* — Shirer, W. L.

- *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin* — Snyder, T.
- *The Gulag Archipelago* — Solzhenitsyn, A.
- *ISIS: The State of Terror* — Stern, J. & Berger, J. M.

At this stage of my career I arrive at the Joint Command and Staff Course with clear priorities. My ambition is to achieve at a level commensurate with my education and professional background yet not at the expense of family. In the past I neglected home life. That is no longer acceptable. Family now comes first. Alongside this I intend to maintain health and fitness, training regularly and sustaining balance. I recognise that the course will be demanding and at times a burden. I worry that workload may encroach on home life or affect mental health. I am also conscious of my scepticism towards ideological perspectives in academic settings. My assertiveness makes silence difficult when I believe something is wrong, yet silence itself can weigh heavily. Personal scepticism carries a risk of disengagement; I should actively cultivate openness without abandoning critical judgement.

**Thesis:** My journey demonstrates that technical competence, operational experience and personal resilience must be balanced by family, integrity and the conscious management of cynicism if I am to contribute effectively at strategic level.

- My personal case narrative is subjective; I will validate it through feedback, doctrine and psychometric data.
- Silence taken as maturity can tip into neglect; I will set clear thresholds for when to intervene.
- Cynicism towards institutions risks disengagement; I will reframe it as motivation for constructive reform.

**Next step:** During the course I will seek structured peer and mentor feedback on when my silence is seen as support and when it is perceived as neglect, using this to calibrate my situational leadership practice.

## *1 My Journey to the Course*

In summary, my journey shows clear change in how I lead and what I prioritise: from micromanagement to situational flexibility, and from career-first to family-first. What has stayed the same is my determination, assertiveness, and integrity. This says that I am resilient and principled, but also that I must consciously manage scepticism to ensure empathy and balance. My next step on the course is therefore to seek structured feedback, so that my silence is recognised as support rather than neglect and to calibrate my leadership practice with clarity and perspective.



## **2 Personal Development Goals and Learning Objectives**

This chapter sets out the personal and professional goals I intend to pursue during the course. It explains how past experiences have shaped my current priorities, outlines the strengths and weaknesses I must manage and defines the specific learning objectives that will sustain both resilience and credibility. The focus is not only on academic outcomes but also on family, health and balanced leadership practice.

Success on the Joint Command and Staff Course (JCSC) cannot be measured by academic performance alone. My career to date has shown that I can complete demanding tasks with determination. I communicate effectively, think analytically and work with candour. Yet I also recognise weaknesses that may hinder progress. I am prone to anger, I spread myself too thin and I remain disorganised. My assertiveness, often a strength, can become overbearing. I have a low social battery and can be cynical, distrusting institutions as well as individuals. These traits may be perceived by colleagues as intimidating or disengaged, even when my intent is otherwise, which underlines the importance of perspective-taking.

Family is the central value shaping my goals. In the past I placed career before home life. That is no longer acceptable. My foremost objective is to ensure that the course does not come at the expense of family. Alongside this I aim to maintain health and fitness by exercising three times per week and sustaining my body weight. These are not secondary commitments but essential. They preserve resilience and ensure that I can complete the course without undermining personal priorities. In leadership terms this reflects the Defence Forces doctrine that credibility rests on both professional and personal integrity (Irish Defence Forces 2023).

Academically I intend to achieve results that reflect my education and input. I already hold two Master's degrees and do not need to prove myself again in that regard. The challenge is to balance ambition with restraint, recognising that at times 'good enough'

## *2 Personal Development Goals and Learning Objectives*

may be sufficient when the alternative is sacrificing health or family. However, lowering standards does not come easily. My habit has been to set the bar as high as possible, and the adjustment required to protect family time may itself be the most difficult learning objective.

My learning objectives are threefold. First, to practise reflection throughout the course, acknowledging both strengths and blind spots. Second, to refine my leadership style, especially in balancing assertiveness with patience and measured silence with necessary intervention. Third, to maintain equilibrium between professional development and family commitments. These objectives correspond with recommended approaches to reflective practice in higher education, which emphasise the integration of personal experience with theoretical insight.

These goals are ambitious yet realistic. They recognise that the greatest challenge of the course is not mastering theory but managing myself. If I emerge with integrity intact, family relationships protected and professional competence enhanced, the course will have been worthwhile.

**Thesis:** The most important outcome of this course will be sustaining family and resilience while refining leadership practice through critical reflection and managed ambition.

- My case narrative is subjective; I will validate it through peer and mentor feedback.
- Balancing ambition with family commitment is difficult; I will set explicit boundaries for study time.
- Cynicism towards institutions risks disengagement; I will reframe it as a driver for constructive critique.

**Next step:** I will construct a weekly plan that protects family and fitness commitments before allocating study, ensuring that ambition remains contained within sustainable boundaries.

<b>Strengths</b>	<b>Areas for Improvement</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Determined; complete demanding tasks.</li> <li>- Communicate effectively and think analytically.</li> <li>- Work with candour and assertiveness (when balanced).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Prone to anger; spread myself too thin.</li> <li>- Disorganised, sometimes overbearing.</li> <li>- Low social battery; can appear cynical or distrusting.</li> </ul>

Table 2.1: (a) Personal Analysis

<b>What do I want to learn/do?</b>	<b>What do I need to do and when?</b>
Practise reflection throughout the course, recognising strengths and blind spots.	Document reflections weekly and seek peer/mentor feedback.
Refine leadership style, balancing assertiveness with patience and silence with intervention.	Apply in group tasks; actively seek feedback after exercises.
Maintain balance between professional development and family commitments.	Construct weekly plan that protects family and fitness before allocating study.
Sustain health and resilience through fitness and weight management.	Exercise three times per week; monitor progress monthly.

Table 2.2: (b) SMART Goals

## *2 Personal Development Goals and Learning Objectives*

In summary, my development goals emphasise balance: maintaining family and resilience, safeguarding health, and refining leadership through reflection and feedback. What has changed in me is a greater appreciation for perspective-taking and restraint. While what remains constant is determination, integrity, and high standards. This reveals a person who is resilient and principled. Also one who must consciously manage scepticism and perception to avoid disengagement. The next chapter builds on these objectives by articulating my individual leadership statement, setting out the principles and philosophy that guide how I intend to lead in practice.

### **3 Individual Leadership Statement**

This chapter builds directly on my personal development goals by setting out my philosophy of leadership. It introduces the principles I believe underpin effective command. It explains how my style has evolved. It evaluates the influences that continue to shape me as a leader. The statement is not static: it acknowledges both strengths and blind spots. I try to highlight how competence, integrity and respect must be balanced with humility, empathy and openness to feedback.

As a leader I believe that competence, integrity and respect form the foundation of effective command. My philosophy is not based on charisma or rhetoric but on steadiness under pressure, the capacity to adapt and the willingness to uphold ethical standards even when unpopular. Leadership for me is both authoritative and authentic. It is authoritative in providing clear direction, demanding high standards and ensuring accountability. It is authentic in being grounded in humility, service and respect for those I lead.

My leadership style has evolved considerably. As a young Lieutenant I intervened in every minor transgression and listened too closely to corporals and sergeants. Today I prefer to provide broad guidance, encourage initiative and step back to allow autonomy. Silence is not weakness but judgement. Nevertheless I recognise that I can remain silent when I should intervene. I am highly assertive and this can lead to overbearing behaviour. I am also reserved in large groups which means that what I intend as support is not always perceived that way. Colleagues may see restraint as disengagement, which shows that perception matters as much as intent in leadership.

My practice has been influenced by a wide body of leadership and professional texts. Carnegie's classic work on influence, Voss's negotiation strategies and Peterson's rules for personal discipline shaped how I engage with people at a personal level. Marquet's advocacy of distributed control and Patterson et al.'s model of dialogue in high-stakes contexts informed my approach to empowerment and communication. McChrystal and Fick illustrated the burdens of command under operational pressure, while Winters and

### 3 Individual Leadership Statement

von Luck exemplified calm dependability in crisis. Together these sources reinforce the value of influence, trust and ethical responsibility over reliance on authority alone.

Of particular influence were:

- *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* — Butler, J.
- *How to Win Friends and Influence People* — Carnegie, D.
- *One Bullet Away* — Fick, N.
- *My Share of the Task* — McChrystal, S. A.
- *Turn the Ship Around!* — Marquet, L. D.
- *Crucial Conversations* — Patterson, K., Grenny, J., McMillan, R. & Switzler, A.
- *12 Rules for Life* — Peterson, J. B.
- *Never Split the Difference* — Voss, C. & Raz, T.
- *Beyond Band of Brothers* — Winters, R. D. & Kingseed, C. C.
- *About Face* — Hackworth, D. H. & Sherman, J.
- *On Killing* — Grossman, D.
- *Leadership: The Warrior's Art* — Kolenda, C. D. (ed.)
- *Defence Forces Leadership Doctrine* — Óglaigh na hÉireann
- *Company Commander* — MacDonald, C. B.
- *Panzer Commander* — von Luck, H.
- *The Face of Battle* — Keegan, J.
- *Panzer Leader* — Guderian, H.

I see myself as situational in approach, willing to adapt to the context and the people involved. I am team oriented and transformational in outlook. I seek out talent, value difference and design jobs to be meaningful and challenging. I take pride in developing others and gain satisfaction from seeing them succeed. I strive to lead by example, maintaining professional standards in discipline, communication and fitness. I value honesty and candour, even when difficult.

The leaders I admire most are those who remain calm and competent in crisis. Major Dick Winters and Major Hans von Luck exemplify the qualities I aspire to: steady, dependable and respected without flamboyance. I want to be the person colleagues and subordinates can rely upon in difficult moments. Within my professional domain I aim to be the trusted expert in improvised explosive device disposal IEDD, the individual whose advice is sought when it matters most.

My Emergenetics profile supports this assessment. It shows high analytical (43%, 95th percentile) and conceptual (35%, 77th percentile) preferences, with very low structural (6%) and social (16%) thinking. Behaviourally I rank extremely high in assertiveness (95th percentile), very low in expressiveness (15th percentile) and mid-range in flexibility (51st percentile). This combination explains both my strengths and my blind spots. I am rational, visionary and determined but can be disorganised, cynical and intimidating to others. It also shows why I thrive on abstract, big-picture problems yet must deliberately invest effort in relational and structural detail. Recognising these traits allows me to work on balance, ensuring that technical competence does not come at the cost of empathy or patience.

Ultimately my leadership statement is simple. I intend to lead with competence, integrity and respect, to balance authority with authenticity and to uphold the values of service and family. I accept that I remain a work in progress. I am still learning in spite of myself.

**Thesis:** Effective leadership requires balancing authority with authenticity, combining analytical rigour with relational sensitivity, and embedding competence in ethical practice.

### *3 Individual Leadership Statement*

- High assertiveness and low expressiveness may lead to misperceptions of intent; implication: seek structured feedback on how my silence or candour is interpreted.
- Strong analytical-conceptual bias risks neglect of detail and relationships; implication: deliberately draw on colleagues with structural and social strengths.
- Reliance on experiential learning provides insight but lacks generalisability; implication: triangulate personal reflection with doctrine and peer-reviewed leadership research.

**Next step:** Use peer and mentor feedback during the course to refine when to intervene and when to remain silent, calibrating assertiveness with relational awareness.

In summary, my leadership statement reflects both change and continuity. I have moved from micromanagement to situational flexibility. Naturally determination, assertiveness and integrity remain constant. This says that I am resilient and principled. I must consciously manage scepticism and perception to ensure my intent is not misread.

Having articulated my philosophy of leadership, the next chapter turns to the Command, Leadership and Management (CLEM) module. This provides the academic frameworks, psychometric testing and applied exercises against which my leadership style can be further tested and refined.



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## List of Acronyms

**CLEM** Command, Leadership, Ethics and Management.

**EDA** European Defence Agency.

**EOD** Explosive Ordnance Disposal.

**IED** Improvised Explosive Device.

**IEDD** Improvised Explosive Device Disposal.

**JCSC** Joint Command and Staff Course.

