



2011 RUSI VIC BLAMEY ORATION

Some Issues of Command in the Twenty First Century

By Rear Admiral James Goldrick, RAN

I am honoured to have been invited to deliver the Blamey Oration to the Royal United Services Institute of Victoria. In delivering this address, I am going to provide you with my thoughts on some issues of command in the twenty first century, with what I hope will be an appropriate fusing of future, present and past. Nearly sixty years after the Field Marshal's death, it seems that so much has changed in terms of command and control of military operations that it is easy to fall into the trap of thinking that nothing of the past has relevance or that we have nothing to learn from our predecessors and forebears. Nevertheless, it is a trap that we must avoid at all costs, even as we grapple with the implications of change in every aspect of human activity.

I will admit to you that I have very mixed feelings in my regard for Blamey as a man and as a commander, but I am also acutely aware that any survey of the challenges that he faced and the problems that he overcame would acknowledge that he had to operate in environments of intense complexity and uncertainty and that, most particularly in his role of Commander of the Second AIF, he maintained a keen understanding of the requirement of what is perhaps the most important of the principles of war – maintenance of the aim, but with a shrewd understanding that the aim may change with the circumstances.

Providing a coherent perspective on the issues of command is no small challenge. I will say at the outset that I can only provide a personal perspective and one that is inevitably limited, albeit my own experience encompasses both multi-national and inter-agency, whole of government operations. I may not be a *simple* sailor, but I nonetheless remain a sailor – as each of us, no matter how we grow and develop, remains a product of our professional culture. All of us who are given command responsibilities need to remember that we come with baggage which we cannot ever fully drop – and we have to remember that, in particular, when we are dealing with complex issues and with people from other national and professional cultures.

However, I can say that my perspective has not only been informed by some four years in seagoing command and two years in higher operational command – as

well as nearly eight years in education and training commands – but also refined by my role over the last three years in the conduct of the highest levels of professional military education in the ADF. Much of what I will say today I have presented to and discussed with the future senior leaders of our three Services, as well as many of their overseas equivalents.

I will declare at this point that I do set one key requirement for effective commanders and that is to be self-aware, conscious of their own strengths and their own weaknesses and determined to embark and maintain themselves on a personal journey of development and understanding. I'll say more about this later.

Let me now set a further context for my personal perspective. Firstly, while I am in no doubt that the nature of war is changing, I am uncomfortable with the impression that I often have from military and strategic theorists (and from people *trying* to be military and strategic theorists – which is not the same thing) that this should somehow be a surprise to us. War is, as Clausewitz pointed out nearly two hundred years ago, a chameleon, and it alters form constantly as the human condition evolves. To find the answer in any aspect of war is simply to invite the adversary to change the question. We *are* going to be surprised by the changes in war as they occur. What we should not be surprised about is that there are such changes – or that they will continue.

I am in sympathy, although though not in complete agreement with General Sir Rupert Smith's contention in his book *The Utility of Force* that the age of industrial war is at an end, because I think that this is to confine the idea of 'industrial warfare' to iron and steam and to apply an essentially post-modernist Western European perspective to a world which is not post-modern elsewhere. My view is that the prospect of nation states engaging each other with non-nuclear weaponry remains and that crises may arise and conventional weapons be utilized with very little warning. National rivalries continue in many parts of the world.

What also will therefore remain, in my view, is the implicit idea of industrial warfare; that, if they judge it necessary, some nation states will exploit their economic strength and the technological capabilities directed by the state to stage such engagements. The difference to me is that to the 'iron and steam' of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries has long been added the electronic dimension and this electronic dimension now, in the form of cyber warfare, has the capacity to be exploited to a degree that we are only coming to understand, both in its 'hard' and 'soft' aspects. Perhaps cyber warfare can be considered in some ways an effort to develop a new and electronic version of the strategy of the indirect approach.

All this said about 'industrial warfare' and indeed 'post-industrial warfare', I do, however, agree to a greater extent with Rupert Smith's contention that 'war amongst the people' will be a significant manifestation of conflict in the immediate future and that we need to prepare commanders for all the complexities and challenges that this involves.

To an extent, I am also impatient with the idea that the nature of war, as opposed to the mechanics of its practice, has changed because of the increasing capabilities of communications and information technology. There has always been a tension between the man on the spot and the commander at a distance and there have always been problems in determining who has the more accurate and complete picture of events and thus who should be making the decisions.

I also grow somewhat impatient with *some* of what is said about the merging of the levels of warfare and the emergence of the strategic corporal (or private). As a naval officer, I have to tell you that I regard the idea of three distinct levels of warfare (strategic, operational and tactical) as a useful construct, but one that was developed in the context of state on state land warfare and thus has certain limitations, even in the context of 'industrial warfare'. The operational and the tactical – and arguably the strategic - at sea have always been intertwined and the concepts of distance and resources hitherto very different than on land. What individual units and platforms do can matter, both locally and further afield – and, in a maritime context, it always has.

It is also a historical fact that small incidents have *always* had strategic effects, albeit usually more slowly than the present day. To give just one example, the war of Jenkin's Ear in the eighteenth century between England and Spain was founded on the pretext of the mistreatment of a single English merchant captain, whatever the wider strategic and commercial issues at stake. It is a legend that the Captain's ear, which had been cut off by a Spanish *garda costa* officer, was passed from hand to hand as evidence in the British parliament, but is a fact that the injury was used by Britain as a useful pretext for war.

In my view what is critical to the compression and fusion of the levels of warfare is not the fact of connectivity, nor indeed its immediacy – a study of the impact of the telegraph and the trans-oceanic cable in the nineteenth century would show you that information exchange could occur, if not instantaneously, then still at a speed which exceeded that of the abilities of many to cope. And that in the nineteenth century remote local commanders complained bitterly about the issues raised by their connection to the 'umbilical cord' of the telegraph.

The greater challenge that I see in the present day and the immediate future is that of the extent and of multiplicity of the means by which information arrives. Information can derive from so many sources and move in so many directions that it creates extraordinary challenges. Furthermore, it also moves in such large amounts and so unremittingly that command organisations and command structures and systems need to be configured so that not only are personnel and commanders not overwhelmed but that they are not ground down by that lack of remission.

And one of the great associated conundrums, perhaps a greater one than any questions of bandwidth, is how best to display data in ways that assist commanders at each level to deal with the problems that they are meant to focus on themselves, while also not restricting their access to data that may allow them to perceive a connection or a critical issue vital to their success. Any

researcher in any academic field will tell you – and there have been studies done – that something like 30% of research discoveries are the result of serendipity, not previous intent. In war, successful identification of the ‘Golden Moment’ probably has at least the same proportion of accidental discovery.

One of the challenges that developers of command decision support systems face is moving from the paradigm of what is fundamentally a computerized version of Second World War area air defence coordination and control systems – based inherently on platforms and individual units – to knowledge systems which actually assist in making decisions about what are much more complex problems in generally much more ambiguous circumstances than a straight forward air or sea battle.

Now, if I can suggest another way of thinking about conflict and its different aspects, it is to propose that the levels of war can be better divided into the remote and the proximate and that the distinction – and indeed the tension – fundamentally depends upon the personal physical risk that the protagonists are experiencing as they make decisions and take actions and the difference between this physical risk and that being experienced by remote authority. And I should add that in my advice to future commanders I emphasise that this distinction needs to be kept in mind at all times by those who are in rear area commands and headquarters. To be fair, it also needs to be borne in mind by those who are in the front line, because each headquarters is subject to pressures that may be intense but which may not be at all obvious to outside observers. Above all, each person needs to make some effort to put themselves into others’ shoes, no matter how highly stressed the situation that they face.

I will also make a point in relation to phenomena which are considered to be recent developments, such as the ‘four thousand mile screwdriver’. The fact is, as I have already implied, that commanders, indeed politicians leading governments, have always intervened when they felt that they had identified the critical point and where they believed that they possessed a better understanding of the issues and what needed to be done than the local commander. Marlborough, Napoleon and Wellington all did it personally on the battlefield, if necessary, more recent commanders by methods more appropriate to their own situations. The tensions between the US Government and the commanders of the US armies in the Civil War are a fascinating insight into civil-military relations in a democratic society under pressure. Nearly a century later, President Truman fired General MacArthur very much because a situation had evolved in which the US Government had a fundamentally different – and much more global and coherent – view of the way ahead than the Theatre Commander. I’ll also say – and the great land commanders that I have mentioned exemplified it (as did Nelson and Cunningham to name two great leaders at sea) – that successful commanders also know when to withdraw from their focus on a vital point and resume their contemplation of the full picture of the operations of their command.

The point is that the really difficult judgement to make is whether the information available to the higher commander actually does give a more

accurate picture – and whether the use to which the higher commander puts that information and the way in which he employs it to exercise command is appropriate within the context of the commander’s overall mission.

In terms of modern information technology, perhaps one of the key skills that need to be developed in our people – and this is not confined to commanders, let alone senior officers – is an ability to assess the reliability and quality of information in order to place the appropriate weight on it as a support to decision making. One could term this ‘google wisdom’ – as any user of the internet should know, the first few entries in any listing provided by a search engine are not necessarily the ones which should be relied upon. Such an ability to judge applies to much more than just the internet (and, to be fair, to many more than just the military). But the more information there is available and the more sources from which it derives, the more important this becomes.

It is perhaps making the judgement about who has the best quality of picture and thus the best situational awareness correctly which will be one of the key challenges for senior commanders, not only in what they do themselves but in how they assist their own seniors and governments to respond to situations and provide higher direction. Commanders must be able to maintain a ‘clear head’ and, perhaps above all, an ability to discern whether the aim must be maintained or whether what is happening around them is changing the very nature of that aim. And this is perhaps one matter on which we can look back to Blamey, particularly in the Mediterranean in 1941.

It is worthwhile to dwell further on this issue. It is fair to say that any commitment by a nation to involve itself in a conflict, while obviously often made at speed and in response to chaotic events that were rapidly unfolding and which were not always fully understood, has been determined as the result of a large number of factors and what is often a delicate and highly complex balance of judgements which were probably not all fully quantifiable, either at the time or even in retrospect.

The challenge for decision makers, commanders and higher advisers is, above all, to be ‘clear headed’ in such circumstances. For the military in meeting this demand, it is important here to understand that making a success of this depends upon possession to some degree at least of Clausewitz’s concept of ‘genius’, the quality which allows the commander to make the correct decision no matter how ambiguous and uncertain the situation and no matter what the stresses being applied to the individual and the group. Please understand that, despite the normal connotations of the term in English, Clausewitz always believed that a commander’s genius not only derived from their basic qualities and intelligence, but on the extent to which they had consciously prepared themselves for command by intensive study and reflection on the problems of war. Much of the talk about ‘genius’ has tended to fix on its importance in decision making in relation to a particular event on the battlefield. I will tell you that I think that it applies just as much to the development and direction of a campaign in a dynamic situation.

As part of this, there needs to be an understanding that end states – and the paths to their achievement – are rarely pure and never simple. There is an accompanying understanding that both ends and means – and thus ways – evolve. I don't mean here to over-emphasise the value of pragmatism. That can easily lapse into the opportunism which has itself generated many strategic failures in the past – witness the history of the German Army in the Second World War. But I do mean to assert the need for realism. I think that this is something that Blamey (and the other senior officers of the Second AIF) generally demonstrated very well in the 1940-41 period.

This means that commanders need to be absolutely clear on their responsibility to explain the issues (both upwards to their own leadership and downwards to their subordinates), provide advice and suggest the most effective course of action – with all the risks inherent on any course of action made very clear. Speaking truth to power is an apt expression in these circumstances. Politicians who have had to fight and win elections in difficult circumstances tend, once they have overcome any initial cultural discomfort at their involvement in military affairs and military conflicts, to recognize many of the same factors at work. I have had it pointed out to me by veterans (and I don't mean just observers) of the political scene that many of Clausewitz's concepts resonate very strongly for those involved in a close election, most notably that of friction!

This approach and this outlook must continue when commanders translate the direction that they receive into action. In most, no, in all circumstances the planning and the execution will involve the management of a multitude of relationships and interaction with many other authorities and organisations. There are a number of terms for the processes involved here, but the one that I think best conveys to the layman the requirement is that of 'orchestration'.

Achieving effective 'orchestration' I see as very much dependent upon the development of a collective understanding of the nature of the problem and what needs to be done amongst all those involved, political, military and civilian, whether in coalition or not. I believe that military leaders have a key role to play in generating such a collective understanding – across and down as well as upwards. But some things need to be borne well in mind. First and most important, the military perspective is not and never can be the whole perspective. The second is that the perspective held will change as the understanding of all those involved extends and matures through the process of interaction with other authorities, organisations and nations.

There is another especially important aspect to all this for a commander. Particularly in insurgency operations, we talk about the necessity to win the 'hearts and minds' of the local population. One of the additional challenges which commanders must bear in mind, notably but not only in the complex environments of 'war amongst the people' is the need to win and hold the 'hearts and minds' of the personnel under command. This is a key command challenge, and it is one that is more intense than ever before because access to so many sources of information is now available to practically every person at every point in the command chain – and often immediately.

Because this may to be dealt with at the same time that an internal understanding as to the direction to take has yet to be developed by the commander himself. From the start there is a requirement for the quality of leadership that will take people with the commander and keep them comfortable with the journey – even when the commander is unsure of the ultimate destination and have yet to settle that internal understanding that I mentioned. I have had the experience, in taking over the maritime interception operation in the Persian Gulf in 2002, of having to spend a lot of time trying to understand what the problem really was in maintaining the sanctions program and preventing smuggling, while we continued operations and then, having developed that understanding, take both subordinates (some of whom were actually senior to me in rank) *and* higher command on the path that I wanted – which was fundamentally different to the way that things had been done before.

But this brings me back to what I think is a key product of the reflection and study that recommend to embryo commanders and the self awareness that I want them to have. I have already noted its importance in relation to being clear headed, but I want to spend some more time on this issue.

What I am talking about is what I would call a ‘sensitivity’ that derives from all this effort. It could be called many things – one of which is the Army’s ‘eye for the ground’ which the Duke of Wellington famously possessed, the quality of always knowing what lay on the other side of the hill, even when he hadn’t seen it himself. This then leads to the ability to seize the moment – what is termed the *coup d’oeil*, the ability to sum up a situation, decide immediately what to do and then do it. Carl von Clausewitz, the author on *On War*, spent a lot of time trying to define this quality. (One of his terms for it, as I have already mentioned, translates into ‘genius’, but importantly as he believed that a great measure could be learned as well as being inherent it isn’t really ‘genius’ as popularly understood in the English language. If, however, we are to take the definition derived from Carlyle’s biography of *Frederick the Great* that genius is the infinite capacity for taking pains, then the word may well be the right one.)

I myself believe that the quality is summed up by the term ‘professional mastery’ and the extent to which a commander possesses it depends upon personal talent *and* what has have derived from both the commander’s own experience and that of others. One of the points about the Duke of Wellington is that he spent many years *consciously* developing his ability to be able to judge and predict terrain as a force multiplier. He didn’t just happen upon the skill. Commanders need to work out for themselves what are the modern equivalents to predicting terrain as a commander for them to practise and hone their expertise upon. As I have already implied, ‘google wisdom’ is definitely one of those equivalents.

So if I can summarise my thinking, it is that, more than ever, commanders and would-be commanders need to embark upon a personal journey of development and reflection, that they must develop highly sophisticated techniques of accessing and analyzing information, that they need to maintain themselves on that journey as they gain rank and that they need also, and this is in some ways the hardest thing, to maintain the pace of that journey even as they grapple with

the complex and even 'wicked' problems that will arise during their command appointments. In other words they must never stop learning. As I put it to the graduating midshipmen and officer cadets of the Australian Defence Force Academy, the earlier that the start of the journey is made, the better. And if they haven't started already, now is a really good time!

I will finish at this point. As I promised, my presentation has been a consideration of themes and problems for commanders and would-be commanders, not a prescription for campaign planning and the conduct of battles. If I can conclude, one reality that I tell the students of the Australian Defence College that they need to keep close to their hearts is that victory tends to go not to the one who makes the least mistakes, but rather to they who recognise their mistakes before the adversary does their own.