

A PERSONAL VIEW: THE PROFESSION AND BUREAUCRACY

Special Forces – in contrast to Gunners, Infantry, Armour and the other essential parts of a modern military - seem to be of increasing importance both in NZ and world-wide as Counter Terrorist Operations loom large in both military and political thought.

An influential US Special Forces Officer created food for thought recently when he revised his longstanding view that **“to be professional”** meant looking good in uniform and being technically and tactically competent. That too was largely my own view - to the extent that I thought about it at all - when serving.

But he’s now changed that view. It’s much more than that, writes Admiral Gardner Howe,* a USN career Special Forces Officer who has served world-wide in Special Operations including recently in US Pacific Command based in Hawaii.

Defence Forces such as his own have, he suggests, a dual character. Each has a bureaucratic dimension as well as support for a military profession. The “bureaucratic” part is unavoidable he says because of size and complexity.

But the point that really caught my eye was his emphasis on the “dual nature” of work in the uniformed military – as a bureaucracy AND as a profession. Bureaucracies, he argues, originate out of a clear need for efficient routine work. Characteristics are centralised planning and control, little delegation of discretionary authority, and compliance based behaviour. Gunners understand that point. It was drummed into us when we served. I doubt much has changed in 2016.

But this highly experienced Special Forces officer with obvious real knowledge of those in uniform in combat and life threatening operations argues that professions originated out of a need for the expert application of specialized knowledge. The Law and Medicine are obvious and longstanding examples.

And for effectiveness, professions need autonomy he suggests.

Such autonomy is based on trust: trust between (1) society and the profession itself, and (2) trust among the members of the profession. That trust is based on shared values [such as is now described in the NZ Army as C3I (**Courage Commitment Comradeship Integrity**)].

TRUST is the key within the Profession of Arms. Then follows the clincher observation:-

*“My colleagues that study organisations have taught me that **TRUST** is largely absent from bureaucracies. In fact such organisations are specifically designed to function in **LOW-TRUST** environments. By contrast, **TRUST** is the central characteristic of a professional organisation.....each member’s actions being guided by an ethic shared across the profession.”*

There is a need to ensure, he urges, that the “overarching characteristic “of military service is, and remains, that of a military profession. A bureaucracy is different.

That, it seems to me, is or should be the position in NZ too. **Trust.** Working with and then relying on the guy or girl on your right or left. On the guns, within an OP or tech party and the chain of command, or as the Admiral did, working as part of small Special Forces teams. The girls and guys in Afghanistan today know it well. Without such trust we falter in combat. A bureaucracy is a different beast.

“Why” is it different asks the Admiral? His answer:-

“Because a bureaucratic organisation will never succeed in combat; only a professional organisation can and will.”

It’s not difficult to relate to that reality when lives are at stake. Servicemen and women have a contract of unlimited liability which can be enforced by law – for the NZDF under the NZ Armed Forces Discipline Act 1971. But that formal NZ position is merely the backstop in a profession. Trust is the oil that essentially makes things hum.

Trust is the key. **Trust** between individuals as well as up and down the command chain. That’s the hallmark of a profession as opposed to the bureaucratic component. Countless civilian organisations copy the successful parts of our style.

The bureaucratic aspect of a measure of control from Wellington is inescapable. What needs regular emphasis is that military command differs from the bureaucratic application of centralised financial and other controls.

The Special Forces Admiral has presented a reminder. It’s timely in the advance of the profession of arms in NZ.

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