

# Thoughts on Generalship: lessons from two wars <sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

'Generalship' is an intellectual endeavour; generals must understand the character of war and create a vision of success. They must be resolute in their commitment and bold in their execution to achieve this success. But they must also never let go of their humanity, their compassion for innocent civilians, their own soldiers and even the enemy. In the abstract, this seems straightforward. But on the ground, when you are exhausted, when information is confused and you are being shot at, even straightforward things are difficult.

In Iraq and Afghanistan, I experienced the challenges and rewards of generalship. And the scale of those wars dwarfed my early experiences in Africa and East Timor. The positions I held were senior and privileged; the Deputy Operations Officer of the Multi National Force-Iraq, a force in excess of 400,000, and Chief of Plans for ISAF (International Security Assistance Force) Joint Command in Afghanistan for a force in excess of 100,000. As part of a small group of generals who met each morning to plan and direct the progress of these wars, I share responsibility for their prosecution. The eight key lessons that are outlined in this article come from my experience of war in Iraq and Afghanistan—the good and the bad.

We had learnt to be bold. This day we were not. On 22 February 2006, al Qaeda in Iraq attacked the most important of Shia mosques: the Golden Mosque of Samarra. We knew that this attack would enrage the majority Shia population which would then seek its revenge. We also knew that violent disorder would follow. But we did nothing. This was a deliberate decision. We would take a cautious path; we would wait and see how the Shia responded. That first night, as we waited, the Shia responded. Over 100 civilians were killed in reprisals in Baghdad alone and 47 were kidnapped, never to be seen again. That night we took a significant step towards civil war; it would take us almost two years to recover—and that recovery would cost thousands of lives. This was a failure of generalship.

In war, the lives of soldiers and civilians turn on decisions made by generals. The one certainty is that the generals will not always make the right decision. While I worked with some talented generals and learnt from our successes, we also made mistakes. I learnt a great deal more from those. Because some of those lessons were paid for in the lives of others, I have an obligation to record them and ensure they are passed on to my successors. This article is written to fulfil that obligation.

This is not a paper about strategy—any village idiot can tell you that a general has to get the strategy right. And the right strategy will depend on circumstance. Nor is this article intended as a comprehensive assessment of the two wars in which I served, Iraq and Afghanistan. That task I leave for another time—perhaps. This article describes the eight most important lessons I took from my war experiences. The lessons are a consequence of both the successes we enjoyed and the failures we suffered.

## The fundamental duty is to win

While our government and community expect much of their generals, all that really matters is to win the war. Failure is not and should not be acceptable. Therefore, like cooks, generals will be excused for flaws in temperament as long as success is delivered.

One of the strangest debates over the two wars has focused on the question of whether 'winning' is an appropriate term. Can a counterinsurgency campaign ever be 'won'? What does winning mean? Does anyone ever win? I confess that I find this debate deeply frustrating and regard it as an intellectual *cul-de-sac*.

War is a competition. If there is no-one competing with you to achieve your aim, then you are not in a war. In a competition you can win or lose—or the competing parties can both win or both lose together. If

you do not enter a competition determined to win, then you will almost certainly lose. In fact, if you do not intend to win a war, it begs the question of what the hell are you doing there. Of course, there is a significant challenge in defining precisely what winning is. I will come to that in a moment.

When I arrived in Iraq in 2005, the notion of winning was rarely discussed but 'exit strategy' was a common topic. The dominant strategic discussion in-theatre focused on the question of when to commence force reduction and by how much. The key task for the planning staff was to develop a glide path for reduction. They developed a timeline that provided options for suitable points to 'off-ramp' brigade combat teams.

For our Commander, these magnificent fighting formations were the basic building blocks of his force. When and where to accept the 'off-ramping' of brigade combat teams represented the generals' most difficult conversation in 2005. And, because it was such a focus, 'force drawdown' became the narrative. As a consequence, we were less willing to hunt, we reduced our profile and we mixed less with the populace—grave errors in prosecuting a war of counterinsurgency.

The effect of this mindset became clear to me in September 2005. Al Qaeda in Iraq raised its black flag over an Iraqi town for the first time, at least in the memory of any of us in-theatre. The town was Al Qa'im, located at the western extremity of the Euphrates valley, close to the border with Syria. This was a problem. It was a clear signal that al Qaeda in Iraq was growing in influence. Furthermore, in the following month the Iraqi people were to vote in a constitutional referendum and, two months after that, in a parliamentary election. Both of these were crucial steps for the nation and thus for our campaign. With the flag of al Qaeda in Iraq flying over the town, it was clear that people in that area were not going to be able to vote freely.

For several weeks, the division responsible for that area did nothing. The mindset of the exit strategy had taken hold. The lack of response and the upcoming elections prompted the Force Commander to visit the division and direct a westward clearance: to Haditha by mid-October and Al Qa'im by mid-December. This was sensible but the impact of the drawdown narrative on the prosecution of operations was unmistakable.

As we entered 2006, the force drawdown shifted from narrative to implementation. In February 2006, we had two fewer combat brigades than in December 2005. From a theatre-wide perspective, this reduction did not substantially limit our combat capability, particularly as the Iraqi army was growing in numbers and, albeit more slowly, in competence. But the momentum to reduce the force and our operational activity would be difficult to change, even if circumstances altered and dictated that this would be necessary.

Well, in that same month, February 2006, circumstances did change. Al Qaeda in Iraq launched an attack that was to become one of the defining moments of the war—an attack on the Golden Mosque of Samarra. The Mosque was elegant, ancient and, more significantly, one of the most important Shia religious sites in Iraq. The attack represented the most confronting and inflammatory action against the Shia since the war started. It triggered widespread sectarian violence, Sunni and Shia against one another, across the length and breadth of Iraq. The surge in violence and the dramatic shift in its nature from a predominantly-Sunni insurgency against us, to Sunni and Shia against one another, prompted us to consider reviewing our strategy. The Chief of Plans led a session to discuss that possibility. As was the practice, I attended the key planning sessions for the operations staff.

The review session was heated. Disagreement among senior officers is both normal and necessary given what is at stake—in fact, if there is no disagreement, you have a problem. The Chief of Plans and his key staff argued that no change to the plan was needed. They asserted that while the bombing had intensified the level of Iraqi-on-Iraqi violence, this did not represent a change in the character of the struggle. They argued that, for some time, the struggle had featured an element of sectarian violence as well as the insurgency, and that our current strategy accommodated this. I disagreed. I argued that a fundamental shift was underway; the struggle was changing to one between Iraqi ethnic and sectarian groups for the political and economic power of Iraq, and away from the fight against us. As a consequence, I concluded, we needed to adjust our strategy. At the session's conclusion, the Chief of Plans decided that a change in strategy was required and that he would so brief the Commander (and US Ambassador) the next day.

As I was the one who had convinced the Chief of Plans that we needed to change, he asked me to attend the briefing to the Commander and the Ambassador. But it clashed with a regular meeting with the Iraqi Joint Command that I usually attended as the most senior officer from the force, so I excused myself from the Chief of Plans' briefing. The briefing did not go well; the Commander and the US Ambassador categorically rejected the proposal for the development of a new strategy. There would be no change to our approach; the drawdown of forces would continue.

The Chief of Plans was angry with me. I had convinced him to change his position but was not there with him to put the case when it really mattered. He was right; I had attended the wrong meeting. I was never to repeat this mistake.

The telling realisation was that the mindset to win had been overshadowed by the mindset of the 'exit strategy' and this had blinded the leadership to the need to change our plan. Famously, in the following year, 2007, there was a change in plan—the surge. The force drawdown mentality was put to the sword and the need to secure a better outcome became the driving idea. Significantly, the surge concept was developed out of theatre and was executed with a new command team—the best way to change strategy is to change the generals.

Generals have no place in a war if they are not determined to win. They have no right to be leading soldiers and asking them to risk their very lives if they do not believe they can win. Napoleon put it this way: 'if you vow to take Vienna, take Vienna'.

## **You need to begin with the end—you need a vision for success**

If you are to win the war, you need a clear concept of what winning is; so you need to start with the end. You need to understand with unambiguous clarity what it is you are striving to achieve. And your explanation must be both compelling and simple. If you do not have a clear understanding of what winning or success looks like, you risk defeat or a lazy meander. And a lazy meander will cost blood, which a general has a duty to minimise.

In 2005 in Iraq, we—the coalition generals—thought we knew what we were trying to achieve. We would say that we were protecting the political process; there was to be a referendum on the new constitution and a national election in the second half of 2005. We would say that we were improving security to create the space in which normality could be restored. And we would say that we were rebuilding the Iraqi Security Forces so that we could transition security responsibility to them and reduce our footprint.

But these three—protecting the political process, improving security and training Iraqis—were merely lines of activity. In other words, we knew the 'how' of our business but not the 'what', and had confused the two. So, while it was far from obvious at the time, we meandered in search of a successful outcome that we had not identified. What would have been the correct 'what'? The answer: to defeat the insurgency.

In 2012 in Afghanistan, what the coalition was trying to achieve was clear enough: deliver a sufficiently stable nation-state to prevent its use as a base for international terrorists. In looking at the requisite foundations for a nation-state in strife-torn Afghanistan, I was in no doubt that this was going to be difficult but not impossible.

This was a country without a long history of effective central government. Nor was there an encouraging history of supporting national institutions such as a bureaucracy, security forces or an education system. There was very little infrastructure and next to nothing on which to base a national economy. Drug money was the biggest income earner behind foreign aid. Simply put, 'nation-state' was not in the recent experience or psyche of the Afghan people. At least we knew what we were trying to achieve, even if it was going to be tough to deliver.

The vision for success is, of course, owned by the political class. The general's responsibility is to assist them to develop it and to provide frank advice on its achievability. The political leadership may decide on a vision for success that generals believe to be extremely difficult to achieve. So be it: the responsibility for what the war is attempting to achieve is owned by the political class. I am reminded of Abraham Lincoln's comments to a cautious Major General McClellan; 'if General McClellan does not want to use the

Army, I would like to borrow it for a time'. Generals may not agree with the vision for success but they must never depart for war without a clear understanding of what it is.

## **Understand the character of the war**

As a junior officer, it struck me as odd that Clausewitz devoted so much effort—all of the first book of his *On War*—to discussion of the character of war. It seemed clear enough that the Napoleonic wars were state-on-state conventional conflicts, as were the two world wars, and that Vietnam was a counterinsurgency. Perhaps for some conflicts it is obvious from the beginning. No doubt some observers of both the Afghan and Iraq wars will argue that they knew the character of the struggle all along. But the in-theatre experience showed me that reading the character of a conflict is not always easy.

In Afghanistan in early 2012, as we planned for operations across the theatre, there was tension between us and our Afghan partners. Underpinning our (ISAF Joint Command) proposed plan for operations was our assessment that we were facing an insurgency based in the south.

I had problems persuading my Afghan counterparts to agree that our plan should focus its main effort in the south. They kept bringing the conversation back to a need to address the situation in the east. There was no doubt that there had been troubling activity in the east and the best trained of our opponents, the Haqqani network, operated from that area. But I felt that our Afghan partners were chasing the wrong issues. It just did not make sense to me to shift the main effort from the south to the east and risk losing Kandahar.

For several weeks, we made little progress on the plan and relationships became increasingly strained. I asked to speak privately with my Afghan counterpart and told him we had a problem. He said 'no, you have a problem; you have assumed that we see the war the same way you do'. He was right. We had not discussed our views on the character of the conflict with our partners, simply because of a subconscious assumption by us that they thought as we did. So then we engaged them in the discussion with which we should have opened our partnership.

Our Afghan partners regarded the conflict more as a conventional state-on-state struggle. They were confident that the Taliban in the south could be managed by tribal balancing, government programs and power-sharing. They were more concerned at the threat posed by Pakistan from the east. They were alarmed by regular Pakistani artillery fire into the provinces of eastern Afghanistan. The approaches to the capital, Kabul, from Pakistan are the shortest from the east and they believed that the Haqqani network, based in the east, was a tool of the Pakistani state being used to destabilise Afghanistan and keep the nation weak.

We assessed Kandahar as the centre of gravity for the insurgency in Afghanistan. It was the historical, cultural and psychological base for insurgents and without it they had no base from which to threaten Kabul. Deny the insurgents Kandahar and you denied them the capital. And, while the capital did not control the nation's economic and political power to the extent the capital of a well-established and coherent nation-state traditionally does, it remained the prize. It was the only location from which a government could influence both the north and the south of the country. Denying the insurgency the capital denied it the ability to exercise control across the nation.

While the conversation on the character of the war was difficult, without it we could never have arrived at a sensible plan to fight it. Our discussion revealed that our Afghan military colleagues were under political pressure from provincial governors in the east to do more in their provinces. We had always been conscious of the challenges in the east but we realised that we needed to be much more explicit in acknowledging them and in explaining what we were doing about them. Having had these conversations, we—the partnership—decided to retain the main effort in the south, with the east as a significant but supporting effort.

While the Iraq War began in 2003 as a conventional state-on-state conflict, one year on it had clearly changed. For those on the ground, 2004 was a point of inflection. Our enemy had concluded that their best course of action was to change the character of the war, and they decided on insurgent warfare. Our enemy had chosen the character of warfare that would dictate the next five or so years of war.

It took months of critical debate in-theatre, as the fighting intensified and coalition casualties mounted, for the generals to agree on the character of the war that was unfolding around them. And they did so in the knowledge that this was not a judgment that would be welcomed by the political leadership, which is principally why it took them so long to reach a decision. In 2003, it became apparent that an insurgency was developing but the political leadership in Washington eschewed the term. It would revive the ghost of Vietnam and mean a commitment measured in years; this was not the war they had signed up to fight. In 2004, the generals obtained reluctant political concurrence that they were fighting an insurgency and prepared the campaign plan accordingly.

Less than two years later, in the wake of the attack on the Golden Mosque of Samarra, widespread sectarian violence erupted pitting Sunni against Shia. For two months, in early 2006, while Iraqis fought among themselves, we restarted the debate on the character of the war. Were we now facing a civil war? We sought advice from military theorists and ambassadors. We reached back as far as the American Civil War and looked also at recent conflicts in Africa. We concluded that there had been a shift in the decisive struggle; the character of the war had changed. Inexcusably, it took us too long to adapt our approach.

Determining the character of the war in which you are involved may not be straightforward, and you must be alert to the possibility that it has changed during the campaign. Generals must commit time and intellect to its assessment and be prepared to meet political resistance to that assessment along the way. What is clear is that if you misunderstand the character of the war, the strategy you develop will be wrong and you will lose.

## **It's about the war, not the battle**

Harry Summers was a distinguished US strategic thinker, although he is more famous for a conversation with a North Vietnamese Army officer during peace negotiations at the end of the Vietnam War. Summers asserted that US forces had never been beaten by North Vietnamese Army forces on the battlefield. 'That is true,' acknowledged the North Vietnamese officer, 'but it is also irrelevant'. The aim, he implied, was to win the war not the battles. The Americans had effectively won the battles but lost the war.

An early indicator that we had forgotten that conversation was the fact that the coalition prosecuted the invasion of Iraq without an adequately-formed plan beyond the defeat of Saddam Hussein's regime. The role of the force was narrowly conceived; the focus was fixed firmly on the fighting. Activity that looked different from military action, often categorised as 'nation building', was shunned.

Yet a key to building the support of the Iraqi people for our operations was to deliver basic services such as water and power. Our opponents knew that. So they frequently targeted water and power infrastructure to deprive the people of basic services and discredit our endeavours. While we understood that we needed to deliver basic services, we never decisively committed to this. It did not sit easily with our culture—primarily a culture of battle. The force was much more comfortable fighting and skirmishing up and down the Euphrates River valley against groups of insurgents. So that is what we did.

The word 'battle' dominated our mindset. In headquarters and operations centres, we no longer had 'duty officers' or 'watch officers', we had 'battle captains' and 'battle majors'. We no longer had operations updates—these were now battle updates. Headquarters no longer had daily routines, they followed 'battle rhythms'. Even our own national headquarters, HQ Joint Task Force 633, which was not directly involved in combat operations, had a 'battle rhythm'.

The first sitting of the freely-elected Iraqi Parliament on 16 March 2006 was a very important day in our campaign. We had talked a great deal about it. The parliamentary sitting would be the ideal counter to the deadly sectarian violence that had followed the bombing of the Golden Mosque in Samarra.

So it was unfortunate that a brigade combat team was permitted to prioritise the battle over the war. The brigade launched a battalion air assault on the same day that parliament was to sit. The assault may well have gone unremarked except that it was accompanied by a very professional media plan. While there was no contact with the enemy, the images of assembled helicopters and battle-ready soldiers amid the dust and sand made great television. There were live crosses throughout the day from key networks.

The news of the sitting of parliament was swamped by the dust and media excitement of the air assault. Our political leaders were unhappy. Our Commander had to answer to President Bush. I was tasked to explain our actions to the Iraqi Prime Minister. He lectured me for an hour.

In 2012, the Afghan President was both vocal and public in his criticism every time our actions led to civilian casualties. And after each incident he called for restrictions on our use of firepower, particularly air-delivered weapons. One such incident occurred in Logar province in eastern Afghanistan just before dawn on 17 June.

Our forces were targeting a local Taliban commander and a small number of his Taliban fighters. They were holed up in a civilian housing complex. Our forces came under small-arms fire as they closed in and so called in air strikes on the fighters in the complex. When the dust settled, aside from the Taliban fighters, it became clear that 18 civilians, including seven children, had also been killed.

Our commander acted. He knew that the tragedy of this incident would drive Afghans against us, help our enemy's recruitment campaign, and further destabilise an already difficult relationship with the Afghan President. The commander issued a directive that banned us from calling in air-delivered munitions against civilian dwellings. He took plenty of push-back from within the force, including criticism that he was putting his soldiers' lives at risk. But he assessed that it would be better to pull back and go after the Taliban some other time rather than risk the lives of innocent civilians. His message to the force was that we had to prioritise the war over the tactical battle.

A general who thinks war is just about the fighting is destined to fail. Success rests on the outcome of the war, not the battles.

### **If you have a choice, take the bold option**

In February 2006, at a place in Baghdad we called 'Spaghetti Junction', we had a problem. Lawlessness was keeping all but the unsuspecting away. Contractors would not traverse the area. Attacks against coalition and Iraqi security forces were launched from the area. An Iraqi divisional commander was killed by a sniper. And a week after the infamous Samarra Mosque bombing, the local population, a mix of Sunni and Shia, began to kill one another.

The Force Commander provided direction: he wanted a brigade of tanks to be deployed to the area overnight and to commence operations at dawn. I considered this unnecessarily risky. Commanders would not have time to properly reconnoitre the area and would be vulnerable to the enemy who had been ensconced there for some time. We would have to leave one of our vital supply routes vulnerable by taking a tank battalion from a route-security mission. And it was unnecessary. A combination of ISR (intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance), attack helicopters and infantry was available and could do the job.

The Commander listened, accepted my points, and ordered that the tanks be deployed anyway. Within 48 hours the enemy had been silenced, the locals calmed down and the press were congratulating us. This was a bold and successful decision, one that demonstrated the Commander's willpower, although no-one had supported his plan. In fact, all of us who spoke said it was unnecessarily risky.

This successful decision stands in contrast to that taken a week earlier in the wake of the attack on the Golden Mosque of Samarra. A couple of hours after the attack we—the operations staff—wanted to put emergency measures in place to protect the Sunni population from the likely Shia retaliation. We proposed an immediate vehicle ban, a curfew from last light, an increase in security forces in mixed Sunni/Shia areas in Baghdad, and the deployment of the theatre reserve. The Commander returned from his meeting with the Iraqi Prime Minister and advised that we would employ emergency measures cautiously. The population was tiring of them and we might risk losing further popular support. We would wait to see how the situation developed. In the days that followed and as we waited, over a thousand civilians were killed. The leadership had been too cautious, too risk averse; this was a significant failure.

Now, I could certainly find some examples of occasions when being cautious paid off. On the other hand, there was not a single occasion when we were bold and regretted that boldness. My message is that in war, if you have a choice, take the bold option—go hard.

## **Never let go of your humanity**

War is a dehumanising experience for all concerned. All our civilising influences—family, the comforts of home, regular meals, routine rest, personal safety—are removed. Soldiers live and sleep rough. They see and are involved in unspeakable events. And the constant fear of danger can slowly drain one's inner strength. A soldier's humanity and compassion for fellow human beings can begin to erode. In this atmosphere, the wall of integrity and discipline that separates an honourable soldier from an armed thug is severely tested.

Some of us in uniform are frustrated by the inclination of the media to join a wrongful act with the fact that the perpetrator has some affiliation with the military, no matter how remote the relationship between the two. We should not be frustrated. This reporting serves as a constant reminder of the nation's expectations of our behaviour and the values that should underpin it. These are the values we carry on operations. These are the values that are the foundation of our actions. These are the values that are the best guarantee we will act appropriately—that we will do what is right.

A culture that places self-sacrifice, discipline and subordination to the needs of the group, and compassion for those it is one's duty to protect, is essential to group cohesion, combat efficiency and operational success.

In my role as Deputy Operations Officer in Iraq, I was responsible for compiling target packages for the approval of the four-star commanding general. His approval was usually only sought for targets in which the estimated number of civilians likely to be harmed exceeded the limit delegated to the corps commander. One afternoon, I received a proposal to bomb a gathering of around 50 insurgents. The corps commander had endorsed the proposal but the number of possible civilian casualties exceeded his authority, and the attack required the commanding general's approval.

The insurgents had gathered in a school. To minimise the risk to schoolchildren, the attack was to be prosecuted at night. But because schools were regarded by some families as safer places to sleep than their homes, the estimated number of possible civilian casualties remained high at 27. The benefits of taking out 50 insurgents were indisputable but not at any cost, and certainly not at the estimated cost. Although the proposal was permitted under the rules of engagement (ROE), I advised the corps headquarters that I would not put my name to it and that I would recommend the same to the commanding general.

It was not always easy to get the corps commander's attention but I did that day. With memorable directness, he reminded me of the deaths suffered by our own troops in that area in recent days and of the atrocities that the insurgents were visiting on the civilian population. He acknowledged the risk to civilians but asked whether I had forgotten we were fighting a war. The notion that you may be risking the lives of your own troops to minimise the risk to others brings an incommunicable pressure. One of the great challenges in war is that you must at once use both extreme violence and extreme humanity. I had the support of the commanding general that day; the attack did not proceed.

Your job as a general is not only to exhibit humanity but to demand the same of your soldiers. A junior Australian soldier in Iraq demonstrated the importance of values in a moment of danger. He was with three armoured vehicles and their crew at a makeshift range test-firing their weapons. The vehicles were stationary and the rear ramps were down. Inside was ammunition, including grenades. Out of the corner of his eye he saw two Iraqi youths running towards the rear of one of the vehicles. A young man running towards coalition soldiers often signalled a suicide bomber. He yelled to them to stop. They kept coming.

Australian ROE forbade the firing of warning shots. In the second or so he had left to act, his mind buzzed with possibilities. It was highly likely that he and his mates were about to be attacked by suicide bombers and he had a responsibility to protect his mates. But he could not be certain that the youths were suicide bombers. While they were not responding to his shouts, they might heed a warning shot. If he were to fire a warning shot, he would be in contravention of his ROE and possibly subject to military discipline. He did

not want to kill two innocent youths but he had to take some action to ensure the safety of his mates. He fired a warning shot; the youths stopped. They were not suicide bombers; they were just teenage boys racing to collect some of the brass cartridges that had been expended in the test-firing of the weapons.

The soldier was instinctively guided by his values and his humanity, and contravened his ROE. He reacted exactly as we would want in that situation. He was formally charged. Fortunately, he had a tenacious commanding officer who eventually convinced the relevant authority to drop the charges and common sense prevailed.

If you need to make a judgment on the likely performance of a military force on operations, your best guide will not be the quality of its legal framework, or the size of the force or the calibre of its weapons. It will be its values, its ethos. We need to be ruled by our values, not valued for our rules.

For generals, this means that we must never let humanity be dominated by rules or process. It means creating an environment in which soldiers understand that the same is expected of them.

### **Fight for unity of command—if you cannot achieve this, focus on unity of effort**

Unity of command is one of the few formally-declared principles of war. Inculcated into us from the beginning of our careers, we are taught that while adherence to the principles of war will not necessarily guarantee success, we ignore them at our peril.

At no time in Iraq or Afghanistan did I observe unity of command at the operational or strategic level—at least not to an extent which satisfied commanders and staff. And we spent plenty of energy trying to achieve this.

In both theatres, although it was more the case in Afghanistan than Iraq, the list of contributing nations and components was long and varied. Within the military, we had conventional land forces, special forces and air forces, none of which wanted to be under the direct authority of another. Outside the military, we had civilian intelligence agencies, civilian police and diplomats. And, of course, none of these wanted to be under the authority of anyone else either. Overlaying all this was the national authority from each troop-contributing nation. This was not such a challenge in Iraq, with some six contributing nations during the time I was there, but Afghanistan was an entirely different matter, with as many as 49 countries involved.

If you cannot achieve unity of command, then you must focus on achieving unity of effort. The Commander in Iraq tried to achieve unity of effort through the production of a joint mission statement. The statement was co-signed by the Commander, representing the military components, and the US Ambassador to Iraq, representing the civilian components. The real benefit lay not so much in the joint mission statement itself but the crucial months of discussion and debate that preceded its signature.

We were not able to achieve effective unity of effort in Afghanistan. Our efforts with the Afghan National Police exemplified the challenge. The police had pockets of excellence but these were overshadowed by the challenges. The Ministry was hollow, corruption was endemic and, while approximately 20,000 officers had uniforms and guns, they had no training whatsoever. Furthermore, Afghan police were being killed in greater numbers than Afghan soldiers. The police were in need of focus, assistance and attention but the international community in Afghanistan could not agree on what was required.

Outside the Afghan authorities, there were three separate international entities whose task it was to advise on policing: ISAF, EUPOL Afghanistan and the International Police Coordination Board (IPCB). We in ISAF sought police involvement in counterinsurgency operations; EUPOL argued that they should remain in traditional policing roles and focus on what they termed 'de-militarising' the police. The IPCB was run by diplomats with no experience of policing or counterinsurgency operations. As a consequence, our efforts were divided and we pulled the Afghan police in conflicting directions. Our failure to achieve unity of effort meant that there was little improvement in the Afghan police in 2012, and they continued to die at unacceptable rates.

Fight for unity of command. If you cannot achieve this, then focus on achieving unity of effort.



## **Information operations—they are the senior leader’s business**

In both wars, I consider the execution of our information operations to have been unsatisfactory. This was because senior leaders, in general, did not invest sufficient personal effort in these operations. And this was partially because our information operations were far too complex.

In both campaigns, we swept up a number of apparently-disparate operations under the capstone concept of information operations. While there are theoretical reasons to link, for example, public affairs with electronic warfare, intuitively the two do not go together. And when you add civil–military and deception operations to that mix, it is easy to become befuddled. I did. As is our tendency when confronted with the complex, we created a specialist staff to meet the challenge. Information operations then became a black art that we left to the specialists.

I concluded that an overarching concept that ties in, among other elements, deception operations and cyber security with public affairs is neither necessary nor helpful. We are better off with more concepts that are smaller and more easily understood. And the synchronisation of these concepts should be left to the commander in the field rather than the military academic in the classroom.

When I was in Iraq, we took out the runners-up prize for information operations. The Commander did not routinely deal with the media. This duty was delegated to a spokesman. The spokesman was a conscientious and articulate Air Force officer. But this was a ground war, and the spokesman was not in charge. Despite his considerable ability and effort, he struggled to achieve the necessary credibility. Consequently, we were effectively unable to convey our message—to our enemy, to the Iraqi people, the international community or even our own forces.

We did not have a public face for our efforts, a leader in whom we could place our trust. And so, in the tough days of February 2006 following the bombing of the Golden Mosque, confidence in our leadership and in what we were doing began to wane. This was a failure of generalship.

Information operations are the senior leader’s business. They are not, nor must we let them become, a black art. They must be command, not staff driven. When the commander personally leads the effort, when he becomes the public face of the effort, success is more likely to follow.

Some 15 years ago, the Commander of the International Forces in East Timor, General Peter Cosgrove, showed us how to do it. Each week he stood before the world explaining what we were doing and why we were doing it. He won and maintained the support of the Australian and international communities for his command.

## **Conclusion**

I started with a purpose to identify the key lessons from my experience of war that I would never forget, some of which cost soldiers and civilians their lives. These are those key lessons:

- Your fundamental duty is to win;
- Identify what winning looks like—you need a vision for success;
- Know and understand the character of the war and be alert to the possibility that it can change during your campaign;
- It’s about the war, not just the fighting or the battles;
- If you have options, take the bold one—we never took a bold option and regretted it;
- Never let go of your humanity—and create an environment in which your soldiers retain their’s;
- Fight for unity of command—if you cannot achieve this, focus on unity of effort; and
- Information operations are the senior leader’s business.

From these eight areas of experience of wartime generalship, three themes emerge. First, generalship is an intellectual endeavour; the most important space on the battlefield is that between a general's ears. The challenge of understanding the character of the war, creating a vision of success and the method to achieve this are substantially more difficult in war—you need the best brains working on this.

Second, once intellect is applied to the challenge ahead, a general must resolutely commit to achieving it and be bold in its execution; generals need to go hard or go home. Third, the drive for success must accommodate compassion; generals must never let go of their humanity. You must never let go of your compassion for your soldiers, for your enemy and, in particular, for the innocent civilians caught up in war.

As a professional experience, my time in the Iraq and Afghan wars was indispensable. I held privileged and senior positions: the Deputy Operations Officer for the Multi National Force-Iraq, a force of over 400,000 (this included the Iraqi Security Forces over which we exercised operational command), and the Chief of Plans for ISAF Joint Command in Afghanistan, a force of over 100,000. We were served by the most advanced technology available. For the most part, I was surrounded and supported by committed professionals. In both theatres, I was a member of a small group of generals who met each morning to plan and direct the progress of the wars. So I share the responsibility for the prosecution of those wars—the good and the bad.

Mine was a position of rare privilege, an extraordinary opportunity for an ordinary Australian. But as a human experience, it was wretched, and in this I would single out Iraq in particular. To be at war is to be transported into the blackest corner of human activity. Unspeakable things happen in war. And in response, you plan and regulate operations that very often result in death and maiming—which are then counted and reported on. You are deprived of sleep; exhaustion is your constant companion. What is required of you is to strain every sinew of competence, flex every muscle of courage, and draw on every drop of your humanity. You can leave nothing in reserve, even when confronted by the most intense of experiences.

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*His recent appointments include Commander 7th Brigade in Brisbane, Head Joint Capability Coordination at Defence Headquarters in Canberra, and the Chief of Plans of ISAF Joint Command in Afghanistan. He is the current Head of Cyber for Defence and is also the inaugural Coordinator of the new Australian Cyber Security Centre.*

## Notes

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