

In the wake of an Admiral: some reflections on sea command in the modern era¹

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In this article, I offer some thoughts on command at sea in the modern era. This is very much a personal perspective that will hopefully be of interest not only to those who will embark on such a command but also to those who need to appreciate the vicissitudes of this complex environment.

In late 2002, I was Commander of the Maritime Interception Force (MIF) maintaining sanctions against Iraq in the North Arabian Gulf. At the time, I was operating from the USS *Milius*, a new Arleigh Burke Aegis destroyer. When not absorbed in the daily demands of sanction enforcement and monitoring Iraqi naval movements, my staff and I pondered the possibility of a command role in the looming war against Iraq.

As luck would have it, nestled in the wardroom bookshelf was a copy of Admiral 'Sandy' Woodward's classic *One hundred days*, which is his memoir of commanding the Royal Navy (RN) task force in the Falklands War.² I had not read the book since I was a Lieutenant Commander but, with the need to mentally change gear from sanction enforcement to littoral warfare, I reread with renewed interest. It is a treatise on naval task group command in the missile age.

Like many a successful submariner, Admiral Woodward is astute, analytical and decisive. He is also an insightful student of naval and strategic affairs. Fortunately for future naval officers, this taciturn officer was assisted in his memoirs by the writer Patrick Robinson, who had previously helped the America's Cup skipper John Bertram write *Born to win*. As a result, Woodward's book was a much more revealing personal account than is the norm for naval memoirs.

As events turned out, I became the Maritime Interception Officer Screen Commander during the invasion of Iraq, with a mixed force of Australian, British, US and Polish ships. From a practical viewpoint, *One hundred days* proved to offer significant insights that I will now discuss.

Organisation

Woodward found it vital to have his battle watches headed by experienced captains that understood his intent and could make quick decisions. They had also to judge when and when not to call him to the operations room. The fluid and demanding environment of war makes it difficult to be prescriptive in this regard. Also, the staff had to be sufficient to allow for sustained 24/7 operations which enabled Woodward to preserve his strength and objectivity as best he could.

On the basis of this advice from the book—and with a couple of months of unpredictable sanction enforcement under my belt—I knew that my staff needed augmentation. Fortunately, the RN was willing to provide an additional six officers and sailors to my staff of 18. Taking Woodward's lead, both my RAN and RN Operations Officers, Lieutenant Commanders Peter Arnold and Andrew Stacey, became the 'battle watch captains'. This arrangement worked wonderfully well.

Admiral Woodward developed a routine of frequent but short visits to his operations room in HMS *Hermes*. This allowed him to maintain his

situational awareness yet not get bogged down in the detail. It became clear to him that he had also to be looking at the big picture and have a good grasp of the longer-term issues. As part of that routine, he would adjourn to his cabin at day's end, have a scotch and pore over his notebook to review issues.

While not having the luxury of a night cap, I found the frequent but short visits to the operations room similarly effective. Obviously, when significant events were underway, there was only one place to be. However, it was only when slightly removed that the broader context could be more clearly grasped.

Fortunately for my staff and I, during the war we were embarked in HMAS *Kanimbla*. She is well laid out with planning areas which allowed room for informal exchanging of ideas with task group staff, ship's company and the various 'visiting firemen' that came our way. This informal 'brain's trust' was invaluable for sifting ideas and testing them in discussion.

I believe, given the complexity of modern warfare, the need to informally access subject matter experts—no matter what their rank—is essential. To facilitate this, it is important for a task group staff to be a friendly, low-maintenance bunch that encourages involvement in the enterprise by those beyond the staff inner circle.

Planning

Admiral Woodward vividly described his planning process. He used a wide array of staff and emphasised the use of liaison officers. Importantly, he brought commanding officers into the planning loop once the 'straw-man' was done. This was to get their input, provide a sanity check and give them ownership. This principle is as old as Nelson, who gathered his captains (his 'band of brothers') prior to the Battle of the Nile. This was also the approach taken with our planning of the Khor Abd Allah (KAA) clearance operation.

The role of the chief of staff, in my case the competent and upbeat Commander Peter Leavy,

was critical in this phase. In any large operation, there are an array of plans, interdependencies and de-confliction that require close attention. The chief of staff has to orchestrate and facilitate that interchange. The corridor to *Kanimbla*'s planning space became well-worn as planners from adjoining operations arrived with charts under their arms. Let there be no doubt—and this is especially the case in littoral warfare—a mistake in the planning phase can lead to fratricide. Indeed, we were to have one close call with a special forces boat coming out of the KAA unalerted. This incident showed that my Task Force Commander, Rear Admiral Barry Costello's fixation on measures to prevent 'blue-on-blue' was well justified.

A divergence from Admiral Woodward's planning experience was that, in our case, the MIF was essentially a bit-player in a large and highly complex invasion. Our remit was to:

- Inspect and clear any merchant ships and dhows exiting the KAA waterway
- Defeat any Iraqi naval forays
- Screen the coalition force from any Iraqi naval incursion
- Prevent any Iraqi mining operations
- Support the take-down of the Iraqi offshore oil terminals
- Bombard Iraqi Army positions on the Al Faw peninsula
- Escort the mine countermeasures force clearing the KAA, and
- Conduct riverine patrols to support the free flow of humanitarian aid shipping to Umm Qasr.

Our very closely prescribed duties effectively negated use of the joint military appreciation process. This may not always be the case and a firm grounding in joint planning is essential.

A cautionary note about the plan is that it is only that—a plan. One is not obliged to follow it to the letter. Yet there is a great reluctance at different levels to deviate from it. This is even when the enemy does the unexpected, the circumstances have changed or that the plan is not working. The

MIF fell into that trap and had great reluctance to overhaul our riverine patrols. We did change but about a day later than we should have done. A key role for a commander, therefore, must be questioning the continued efficacy of the operational plan.

Relationships

In his new foreword in the 1997 edition of his book, Admiral Woodward talks about how each headquarters could only see part of the picture. As such, their actions can be perplexing. Woodward considered it essential to remind his staff that the other headquarters were just trying their best and not trying to muck them around. In fact, my staff and I experienced a similar situation. Over time, the relations and temper of the staff in the various headquarters get frayed and this is particularly so when people are tired or the pressure comes on.

Related to this, caution should be exercised in reacting tersely to issues by signal or email. I would not criticise anyone in print and gave out praise in at least equal measure – the old maxim: praise in public, criticise in private. The other rule was only take on one headquarters at a time. A commander and his staff being known as difficult does not encourage help when things go wrong (as it will).

In coalition operations, the command arrangements are often more cumbersome than they need be. An additional command layer (or more) will often exist. Moreover, national considerations are an ever-present factor and the existence of command areas with little role other than reporting back home or raising a red flag to the mis-assignment of forces is not unusual. To make this arrangement work requires goodwill, a personal relationship with each superior commander and good liaison officers.

In the Gulf in 2003, the RAN fielded liaison officers in the cruiser USS *Valley Forge*, the carrier USS *Constellation*, the 5th Fleet Headquarters, with the Royal Marines ashore, in a Kuwaiti missile boat, the lead US missile boat USS *Chinook* and the Polish support ship ORP *Czernicki*.

Importantly, the liaison officers were the glue that held things together and, among other things, good liaison officers can tell you when your decisions look good or are not playing well at all. To do this, they need to be kept in the picture and trusted. My guide in picking liaison officers was: unless you sorely missed their presence in your own ship, then they were not the right officer.

To navigate this potential command and control minefield, I found there were three things that need to be remembered:

- When an incident occurs, there is invariably at least two levels of headquarters watching events from a 'chat room' or some other electronic means. The actions of the on-scene commander are keenly watched, and do not be surprised if helpful suggestions flow. It is important before this occurs that the commanders at the different levels clearly understand and communicate to their staffs the authority of each commander to undertake their role.
- There can be a clash of cultures between the people doing the fighting and those further removed with the soul-destroying job of monitoring and preparing the next 'PowerPoint' briefing.
- Be thankful you are at the sharp end and not a watcher of events.

Like Nelson, Admiral Woodward placed great stock in his commanding officers. He established individual relationships with his commanding officers and would talk to them personally if he had difficult tasks for them. That sat well with me and I made the time to get in a boat and go talk to them individually where possible. In my time in command of the MIF, we had 37 ships pass through the command for varying periods. It was fascinating to see the difference in the approach of each captain and the resultant feel of each ship.

As the invasion planning neared its end, Admiral Costello came to the *Kanimbla* to review and hopefully approve our plan. All the MIF captains

were present and, instead of a PowerPoint brief, we had a chart and cut-out ships to move around. The most potent advocates for the plan were the captains. All the Admiral's difficult questions were directed to his captains. He knew it was they who were taking their ships into danger and he would get candid and well-considered answers. They could only do this through their active involvement in the final operational planning.

In wartime, captains can come under immense pressure and the way they deal with pressure varies greatly. Furthermore, how a task group commander manages a highly-stressed captain is a difficult matter. In my case, the vast majority of captains did a magnificent job but a few struggled. I took the view that my job was to encourage and get the captains through; not to recommend to a captain how to fundamentally review their command style. On reflection, I am not sure whether I dealt with this aspect as well as I could. Perhaps what I can say is that the captains that performed best were those who were professionally competent, shared information with their ship's companies and delegated as much as was reasonable.

In coalition operations, one is generally dealing with assigned units that are of first-class quality. But there are rare cases where a captain can make his ship a danger to itself and the force. In that case, there can be no hesitation and I had one such coalition ship. My approach was to go discreetly through the respective national channels and the ship was promptly reassigned.

Another challenge for a task group commander is that the intent is to develop a synergy—an effect greater than the sum of the units involved. In the case of the MIF, this was evidenced by the need to field much larger number of boarding teams at any one time than we normally could. This required a much more interchangeable approach between Coalition ships, helicopters, boats and boarding parties. An impediment to this aim can be rivalry between ships. Over my time, I had three pairs of ships that were keen rivals. One ship built its whole ethos on 'bagging' its rival. In wartime, this is unacceptable. I asked the captain to see the issue from a broader task group

perspective and he put initiatives in place to develop a more positive culture in his ship.

Risk

In wartime, the placing of mission achievement above the safety of your people is one of its defining characteristics. Like everything else related to command, it is not black-and-white. Admiral Woodward talks about the need to harden yourself to make decisions for the mission success and it is a difficult balance between regularly reviewing risk and allowing it to get in the way of other decision making.

For important decisions, where higher risk is involved, it is important for the Commander to talk to the affected party. Admiral Woodward did this with the commanding officer of a frigate prior to her run through a sound where there was a risk of mines. I had a similar conversation with the commanding officer of the *Chinook* to explain why I was taking non-essential personnel off his ship. The ship was going to escort the mine countermeasure vessels and so was to be the first non-low magnetic signature ship going up the KAA. Among other things, the face-to-face meeting ensures both parties know the risks and the rationale for the decision.

Media

Admiral Woodward found issues related to the media drew on a surprising and, at times, an inordinate amount of his energies. I was therefore not surprised that media affairs came to be my second priority after operations. Fortunately, like all MIF commanders before me, I had many and diverse media representations visiting the ships at sea. This reflected the US Navy's relatively open and confident approach to its media relations.

The best approach in facilitating media engagement was concentrating them on the command ship and sending them to ships where the action was likely to be. This reduces the burden on smaller units who should not have the management overload, and the command ship can also provide the broader context for what is

going on in the conflict. It is also vital to understand what each media group wanted to achieve and where they want to go. I was surprised how much these factors could vary.

A proactive and open approach to media increases the chances that accurate coverage of the task group's activities can be provided. This is not only important for the public, but also for families and provides a historical record of the sailors' contribution to a campaign.

Stress and pressure

Task group command is extremely draining and Admiral Woodward explains his need for routine. One must be aware of looking after yourself and developing a sustainable 'battle-rhythm'. Related to this was the importance he placed on being calm in public. Admiral Woodward recounts the confused scene in his operations room when HMS *Sheffield* was hit by an Exocet. All eyes were on him. I also became very conscious that when events were a bit tense or generally not going to script there were quite a few eyes, young and old, checking on how I was coping with it all.

A useful aid is to have trusted friends who will give you a few home truths about how you are travelling both in terms of performance and general well-being. Fortunately, a couple of the more senior members of my staff filled that role and I was also fortunate in having a Naval College classmate, Captain Peter Lockwood in the *Anzac*, keeping a weather eye on me.

Communications

Admiral Woodward emphasises that communications are the major cause of command and control problems. I also found this to be the case. It was the reason I moved from *Milius* to *Kanimbla*, where greater bandwidth and more ready access to Australian national systems could be assured.

One of the defining aspects in maritime operations is the rapid adoption of information

communications technology and it is vital to seize the benefits of any advances where they can be obtained. There is a key competitive advantage to the maritime force that does so.

Summation

A point Admiral Woodward made in the foreword to Andrew Gordon's remarkable book, *The rules of the game: Jutland and British naval command*, was that:

It is difficult—but not necessarily impossible—in peacetime, when the stresses and unpredictabilities of war are hard to imagine (and still harder to simulate), to identify who would be good at it.³

This may be true. However, I believe the better we professionally prepare our prospective commanders, the more likely it is that they will succeed. As I have tried to demonstrate in this article, part of that preparation is to read about those who have gone before. It will provide context and, more often than not, show that what you are experiencing as a commander is not unique.

Rear Admiral Jones joined the RAN in 1974 and was a surface warfare specialist. His postings included Commanding Officer HMAS Melbourne, Commander Australian Surface Task Group, Commander Australian Naval System Command and Head ICT Operations/Strategic J6. Rear Admiral Jones has contributed to number of books on naval history and strategy, the latest being 'Naval Power and Expeditionary Warfare' (Routledge, 2011).

He is a graduate of the Advanced Management Program of the Harvard Business School and has been a Visiting Fellow at ADFA. He was promoted to Vice Admiral in November 2011 and appointed Chief of the Capability Development Group. He was appointed an Officer of the Order of Australia in 2012. He retired in October

Notes

¹ This article was printed in Issue No. 184 of the *Australian Defence Force Journal*, published in 2011.

² Admiral Sandy Woodward, *One hundred days: memoirs of the Falklands Battle Group Commander*, HarperCollins: London, 1992.

³ Andrew Gordon, *The rules of the game: Jutland and British naval command*, Naval Institute Press: Annapolis, 1996, p. xii.