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ENCLOSURE 1F

COMMANDING IN ADVERSITY MODERNISING SPECIAL OPERATIONS COMMAND

Introduction

The selection and assumption of Command at any level within our Defence force is a great privilege. To command Australians, who in today's Army are arguably some of the finest of their kind in the world, is both an honour and a serious obligation. Those who wear that mantle, carry a burden of accountability and responsibility that holistically balances many often competing facets in the pursuit of directed requirements.

Having commanded at almost every level within our Army, in both peace and conflict, I can attest to the significant complexity and considerable burden that modern Command in the Defence Force demands. Few who have not walked in those shoes, can speak authoritatively of the fluid context and contradictions that infuse so many decisions and challenge easy definitions and applications of risk, ethics and law in the timely pursuit of outcomes.

In a Defence Force and an Army, of global renown, it is perhaps then an undertaking of elevated significance to be appointed Commander Special Operations - Australia and extended the opportunity to command our best and most capable forces and the missions of National Interest that they sustain.

I am the latest in a line of individuals to hold this appointment. My predecessors, all accomplished and impressive leaders, cumulatively contributed to capability growth and operational achievements that today, see Australian Special Operations at the forefront of the best forces of their type in the world. My predecessors have almost all moved on to hold appointments of considerable influence and significance across almost every element and level of Australian society. Their context and challenges were unique to them and their positive legacies are established.

For me, still in the first year of my appointment, the legacy of my Command tenure remains to be defined.

This paper, discusses the Command I took responsibility for and defines the challenges of significance I have identified which most inform my method and motive as I correct key deficiencies, maintain operational commitments and modernise for future challenges.

Modern Legends

Earlier this year I attended a [REDACTED] in Canberra. It is a wonderful night and a most worthy cause [REDACTED] At most tables senior ADF leaders and many serving personnel assist in hosting guests and acting as ambassadors for all Service personnel. In my case I was privileged to be sat alongside

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[REDACTED] formed a close bond with Special Operations, especially SASR.

However, the fun of the evening is often pyrrhic for those of us who have or continue to serve. On arrival, I meet [REDACTED]. We hugged and shared support in memory of their son who was killed in Afghanistan [REDACTED]. The matter is still raw for them as eyes mist while they describe their son and their latest experiences seeking explanations [REDACTED].

At a mid dinner break, I met an old friend who had served with me within SOCOMD on operations 15 years earlier. My delight rapidly evaporates as I learn for the first time of his struggle with PTSD. Separation from his beautiful family, alcoholism and a serious suicide attempt frame his context. Day to day constant struggles, difficulty concentrating and speaking and an avoidance of alcohol lest it trigger another suicide attempt which he admits, dogs his inner self.

Another friend. A senior soldier in Commando's who I remember as physically and attitudinally one of the most impressive individuals which I have had the honour to serve. To my shock, I find a hollow version of that memory. Faded, stuttering and shadow boxing the manifestation of PTSD which crept up on him a year after leaving the ADF.

I wish these examples were exceptions, but more frequently than I would wish, people who are wounded and injured both physically and mentally, form an increasing component of my Command responsibilities. So perhaps with some greater soberness than many of the civilian guests would realise, these issues accompany my thoughts as a SOCAUST as I progressively coalesce these inputs in my exercise of command and the weighting of context.

At the pinnacle of the evening, [REDACTED] inspires us all with the value of the cause and the need to maintain support. It is an easy argument to a room already emotionally committed. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] That story, told in humour, reflects on [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] for an evening of drinking. [REDACTED] finished with a statement that "this is what Australian soldiers do" and the crowd, claps in [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] His respect and trust for the SASR a strong belief, which almost all in the room share.

[REDACTED] knows almost the entire senior leadership of the ADF is in the room, along with myself. He also knows that his story, while light hearted, is publicly admitting and popularising an act which at the time, and still, remains unacceptable. [REDACTED] public story telling is itself illustrative of a range of factors relevant to modernising SOCOMD.

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First, [REDACTED] that of Special Operations in general and SASR in particular is by any definition contemporarily exceptional in the public, media and political domains. It is arguable that SASR retain an image that is iconic and popularised in a way analogous that that of the ANZAC's. That is that they are seen as hero's in a way that isn't easily swayed and that the quantum of public recognition and adulation, feeds a mindset both within and without SOCOMD that represents an uneasy balance between deserved recognition of sacrifice and inflated expectations of standards.

Second, this status is reinforced by a strong Diaspora of former SASR members now in [REDACTED] elevated positions in public and private industry who are strong in advocacy, frequently entrenched in their support for unit level matters and associated in various ways that depending on your perspective, are a great strength or a intimidating competitor in any contest of ideas for reform and change. This network of friends and associates is extensive, bonded by trust, able to extend considerable influence and sits outside of the chain of command. Some would argue that passage of information, opinion and formulation of positions through collaboration and consultation via this Diaspora is actually stronger than the chain of command within SOCOMD.

Third, a steady flow of previously endorsed commercial products including books and documentaries maintain a strong public image and story telling culture that reinforces stereotypes and convey an impression of official endorsement that is frequently unfounded. The most recent of these include a series of documentaries nationally released with the prominent [REDACTED] and a book purporting to provide privileged insight into the future concepts for special operations.

Finally, [REDACTED] portfolio of impressive stories told at gatherings such as the [REDACTED] are already extensive and mainly positive. [REDACTED] to elect to tell stories that are "bad" examples sets him up as a role model of behaviors and attitudes that some would see as holding himself and his colleagues to a different standard, rather than a higher one. [REDACTED] approach isn't meant to be negative or divisive, but it is. In a subtle, incremental way it argues for standards and behaviours that are in contradiction to those expected and directed. Doing so publically magnifies the problem, especially for a SOCAUST seeking to address these issues and to do so against a significant weight of organisational, National and public opinion.

Unsaid on the night, [REDACTED] was the fact that [REDACTED] as a result of my efforts to remediate challenges within SOCOMD, I am fully aware of the drinking incident and wider issue to which his story alludes. This in part might have motivated him to 'come clean' and be on the public record. These are issues and concerns I know are shared [REDACTED]

The previous CDF, David Hurley adopted the phrase, "the standard you walk past is the standard you set."

Restorative Engagement

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Three months after assuming command, efforts to factually anchor extensive reporting of governance, accountability and behaviour transgressions were bearing fruit of an unwelcome kind.

[REDACTED] SASR while deployed on operations in Afghanistan over a period of seven years commencing from 2007, it was clear that practically and cumulatively, the quantity and nature of the standing allegations and known acts of unacceptable behaviour and various failure to comply had grown too large to meaningfully manage through formal processes of administrative and disciplinary action. Further, it was apparent that the sum of these incidents significantly contradicted the public and Defence view of the quality and performance of special operations. Simply reacting to these events as had been done in the past had created a vicious cycle of actions that generated destructive secondary effects across and within the organisation. How had this happened and what was the cause of such a counterintuitive circumstance?

The Problem

As Commander, I sought an approach that targeted the causes of the issues identified at the unit level and that avoided the unsuccessful approaches of the past. In essence, I had determined that causality in this case was a deficit of trust borne of incrementally compromised standards across the SOCOMD hierarchy and complicated by a period of extended operational deployment and concomitant sacrifice which through a mindset of exceptionalism, had become a confected justification for behaviors and outlooks, unacceptable elsewhere in Defence.

I was strongly informed by the knowledge that prior valiant attempts [REDACTED] to address this and wider cultural issues across SOCOMD has resulted in mixed outcomes. Strong evidence existed that negative unit, cultural and organisational attitudes had become entrenched and to a degree, was resilient to efforts to reform given how entwined they were with the positive behaviours that were so frequently and publically applauded. Clearly something new was required.

I engaged the entire Special Air Service Regiment in Tranches. First I commenced with the leadership group most central to that Regiment. The CO and the RSM.

Second, I engaged the collective Major's and Warrant Officers.

Finally I engaged every 'badged' member of the Regiment as a whole and in an address of substantial candour, I laid out the circumstances, my analysis of the causes and the implications of these for the Regiment and the Command.

Afterwards, I invited each and every member to write to me personally to advise me of any unacceptable behaviors that had witnessed or conducted since joining the Command.

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My reasons were transparently articulated to all concerned. If we were to move forward, address the issues and put the past behind us in a constructive manner, I needed as their commander to trust that each and every member recognised what was wrong, was honest concerning the issues concerned and openly acknowledged where mistakes had been made and needed to be corrected.



my approach with SOCOMD was voluntary and drew strongly on the themes of Trust, accountability, impact on reputation and a need to move forward. I intuitively gave an undertaking that provided no criminal activity came to light, that I would respect the confidence of these who had written to me as I formed my views concerning appropriate administrative action where evidence emerged that justified this. I was also unambiguous that any criminal activity would be actioned without hesitation using formal processes.

In total I received 209 letters. This is what I learned.

No evidence of criminal behavior was presented.

This is not about alcohol. Unauthorised consumption of alcohol was a symptom and a contributing factor to risks and behaviours that go well beyond the alcohol question.

That drinking on operations, tacitly endorsed by the leadership, had over years resulted in an inherited culture that was endemic across deployed SOCOMD forces and had become normalised. The extended period over which this applied, translated into generational behaviors which involved all ranks including CO's, RSM's and SOCAUST's. Many involved subsequently migrated to higher ranks, more demanding appointments or to higher SOCOMD HQ. Over time, the entire command became infused with a degree of organizational blindness to these practices and carried forward with them the attitudinal outlook that the operational end and the sacrifice made on the battlefield, was a partial justification.

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This behavior was encouraged through the eventual establishment of a drinking facility called the 'Fat Ladies Arms' which allowed for easy access to quantities of alcohol and was so extensively used that it is difficult to conclude that almost everyone in the SOCOMD chain of command was not aware of this.

The extensive consumption of alcohol over time, in many cases, translated into risky or unacceptable behaviour with 2nd and 3rd order implications across the organisation. The enduring implications more concerningly manifested in Command, Leadership, management and cultural terms. These manifestations of unacceptable behavior were incremental and across years and rotations, became generationally normalised. At some point, this normalization became so extensive and pervasive that the Chain of Command became actually or willfully blind to this.

Almost everyone concerned, appeared genuine in their belief that the use of alcohol on operations was as a coping mechanism for stress, grief and high tempo and while all acknowledged it was technically wrong, almost all agreed that under the circumstances, this was a reasonable method of dealing with the challenges that SOCOMD face as a result of extended high intensity operations.

Most had formed a mindset that their sacrifice and sustained operational tempo warranted their actions, and in some degree excused lapses or variations on standards because the operational imperatives and their seriousness were judged to be so significant. This outlook was shared even at more senior ranks.

Many believed that 'outsiders' didn't fully appreciate the challenges and sacrifice being made by the Command over so many years, and were deeply concerned that the unique SOF context was not appreciated. This context, in turn, became for some, a logic of exceptionalism warranting the application of different rules and behaviours to those applied to other ADF members. In some cases, this unique context, 'drinking culture and operational sacrifice was used as an excuse in mitigation by those who were being formally disciplined for known transgressions of directed behaviour by CJTF633 or within SOCOMD.

In many recent cases where individuals or groups were being disciplined for unacceptable behaviour linked to alcohol, the attitude within parts of SOCOMD appeared to be closer to "the crime is being caught." Whereas, for every individual caught and disciplined, it became a case of double standards because they were being prosecuted for behaviour that they saw as sanctioned by their immediate SOF leadership and tacitly endorsed up to SOCAUST level. This led to conditions and attitudes which increasingly questioned the consistency of the Chain of Command, its courage to act in the face of these problems and the suggestion that many in appointments of authority had become compromised. Almost every letter from a SNCO and Officer admitted to this and from this I conclude a degree of learned helplessness prevailed within SOCOMD when it came to dealing with a range of 'difficult' issues.

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That these behaviours appear to have been [REDACTED] contributing factor which did not excuse these behaviours, but does provide some insight into risk and behavioral challenges across the [REDACTED] communities who rendered extensive and sustained operational service.

These behaviors were not confined to SASR personnel, and appear to equally involve 2 Cdo Regiment and other SOCOMD personnel. There is evidence to suggest that heavy consumption of alcohol may still be a concerning behavior and risk factor with many in SOCOMD today. Action to address this is being progressed under existing programs supported by Defence, Army and SOCOMD through Plan SALUS.

The Next Steps

The distillation of these admissions which for me were surprisingly honest, went some way to explaining the source of some of the unacceptable attitudes and performance of SOCOMD personnel back in Australia. It also provided insight into how to approach constructive remediation of this.

As a Commander, the quantity and candor of the letters reassured me that the unit members were prepared to trust me and were genuine in their desire to resolve this.

While I do not wish to exaggerate the value of this restorative approach, actual and anecdotal evidence from the unit since this event indicates a significant turn around in the attitude of the unit and their collective determination to redeem poor practices and step forward more positively into the future.

To my mind, it is no small thing that a unit and Command that for a period seemed to be experiencing almost weekly high profile events of unacceptable behaviour or Governance transgression, has gone almost 6 months without a significant incident arising.

A significant number of initiatives at Command and unit level are now in place that apply lessons from this and attempt to prevent a recurrence. These heavily emphasise personal and shared accountability, mature acceptance of the importance and application of standards, an organisation culture of learning from mistakes as an essential basis for agility, innovation and relevance and finally, a transparent and consistent Command approach to those who make errors of judgment where their attitude and character are not in doubt where reform, redemption and return to normal duties is the over-riding goal.

I am now in the process of engaging with individuals as a result of information learned from these letters. This and the actions I direct from these sessions including re-training, counseling, support and treatment will collectively constitute Administrative action and allow me to recommend closure of [REDACTED]. I intend to formally write to you and seek your agreement before the end of November 2015.

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In combination, the Command initiatives and the Administrative actions applied and being undertaken constitute a robust response to both the allegations and the problems linked to these.

This is of itself, not a solution to a range of wider challenges confronting SOCOMD just now that if not remediated, may contribute to a recurrence of similar behaviours at some future point. This action does however, go a long way to setting more positive conditions for meaningful reform to now proceed and established critical insight into aspects of causality and context that have contributed to a series of concerning behaviours and transgressions within SOCOMD.

SAMPLE QUOTES

"SOCOMD and SASR have achieved some remarkable accomplishments during the many years we have served on operations in Afghanistan. It is with great regret that we are seeing evidence that we are remembered for instances of unacceptable behavior rather than our collective achievements on the battlefield and the outstanding effects produced."
SGT X 10 operational tours

"A sense of relief that these issues can be aired and addressed with potential to learn and move forward" SGT Z 13 operational tours.

"Trust has been lost at all levels and must be restored."

"I was informed during my handover that it was normal for us to drink alcohol and that this was endorsed by SOCAUST. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] SGT
X, 8 operational tours.

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"I drank alcohol contrary to Army policy and as a Trooper I witnessed this behaviour at all levels of command and therefore, was not of the opinion that what I was doing was wrong." CPL Y, 3 operational tours.

"In 2011 I discharged and undertook work as a civilian. I rejoined the ARA in 2014....since rejoining and in 2015 in particular, I can unequivocally state that there has been massive cultural change around the unit in regards to alcohol and standards of behaviour as a whole."

"Whilst in a position of command I consumed alcohol in the presence of subordinates numerous times and even turned a blind eye to my subordinates that were consuming alcohol." Tpr X, former 2 Cdo team 2IC, 7 operational tours.

"I have seen alcohol consumed on every operation since 1999 by every rank up to and including JTF and Unit commanders..." SGT Z, 10 operational tours

Whilst on the 2010 rotation it was rumoured that various elements were utilising other banned substances such as opiates and steroids." CPL Y,

I refused to attend several functions at the Gratwick club due to the presence of strippers....As a result, I experienced punitive treatment by instructors who thought my approach elitist." CAPT X.

"During the last decade, we have lowered our moral obligations and carried ourselves no better than an Infantry Battalion of a bygone era, where binge drinking and other reckless behaviour was commonplace." CAPT X

"I condoned and was directly involved with facilitating the approved supply of Alcohol to [REDACTED] I was also tasked with and supplied the CO and RSM SOTG with bottles of 15 yro Scotch." SGT Z

I believe that the cause of so many incidents of unacceptable behaviour is accountability. I believe there is a culture of shielding or protecting individuals from prosecution. Individuals that bring the Regiment and the Command into disrepute from gross misconduct or unacceptable behaviour should be punished and if necessary removed from the unit. [REDACTED]

SGT Z

"During Wakes it was common practice for the other FE personnel to donate their alcohol ration to the FE of the deceased soldier. This enabled the afflicted individuals of these FE to become intoxicated to the point where they would drop their reserved demeanour." CAPT X

"I believe that the consumption of alcohol on operations is a systemic SOCOMD issue as, from my observations, all deployed SOCOMD units and their leaders were involved in

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the consumption of alcohol and that all levels of SOCOMD leadership had an awareness (or direct knowledge) that it was occurring." CAPT X

"I consumed alcohol with the CO and RSM of SOTG along with the rest of the TG from 1300 throughout the remainder of the day and into the evening....I personally drank alcohol with [REDACTED] and on the same deployment I saw a SASR Brigadier intoxicated in Kabaul." CPL X

I decided it was of no interest to me to condone or report such incidents of alcohol consumption by members of SOTG, as it was not in my control to police such incidents." WO2 X.

"The tacit approval from the hierarchy of the SOTG caused a number of secondary effects in the command relationship....this created double standards that was apparent during the rotation and did not facilitate a healthy working dynamic....social activities between [REDACTED] senior ADF members, [REDACTED] and Special forces groups where alcohol was consumed were common place." CAPT Y

"I observed regular fraternization between Regiment members and [REDACTED] personnel." TPR Y.

"I had an inappropriate relationship with a female member of [REDACTED] CPL Z.

"I've witnessed people brawling while intoxicated and being obnoxious." SGT Y

"I actively participated in, and fostered a culture of drinking alcohol in express contravention of applicable policy and orders. In doing so, I undermined the authority vested in me and demonstrated a willingness to put my own desired ahead of the mission." MAJ X

"I commend you on your efforts to address the myriad of issues that have plagued the unit for some time now. At times, I am lost for words when these indiscretions become apparent. As you described previously, behaviour is below Army standards. I feel that respect for others and integrity has been willfully compromised and that there is a sense of false greedy entitlement. The traits we were selected for have been tossed aside and become foreign to many." SGT Z

"I would like to take this opportunity to commend you on the unprecedented steps you are taking to address the issues that this regiment is currently facing. For some time now there has been an absence of adherence to the very traits that we have been selected for. It was always my belief that this unit praised and fostered an environment of uniqueness and difference with its members, but unfortunately I have witnessed and experienced the exact opposite of this in the workplace." TPR X

"I believe that it is timely that we begin to reign in a drinking culture that seemed to be spiraling out of control." SGT X

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"It made me aware that there was a well organised unauthorised process that enabled the venue (Fat Ladies Arms) to be well stocked with alcohol and that alcohol was being regularly consumed by FE-A personnel." MAJ Y

"I believe that you have made a creditable (unprecedented in my time) step in building the trust you seek, and it is optimistically welcome across the unit. However I can confidently speak for the majority of SASR in saying that trust in SOHQ has all but evaporated in a cloud of confused standards. In fact I believe that most members of SASR see SOHQ as being the toxic centre of the tensions and inter-unit issues of recent times." SGT Y

"The drinking did not get out of hand until the construction of a Bar, the 'Fat Ladies' in Afghanistan. After nearly 20 years service within the Regiment, I have great concern that we have not changed and that some of the troop commanders who are now Majors are compromised." SGT Z

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