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# MASTERING THE MILITARY MID-LIFE TRANSITION

by

BRUCE T. CAINE

**T**here is a crisis of personal security in the Army today. More and more professional soldiers are citing the unpredictability of careers beyond 20 years of service and other issues related to family and personal life satisfaction as reasons for resignation or early retirement. One means of exploring the underlying causes for this crisis of security is to examine the recent research in the field of adult development and to apply the findings to an assessment of military careers.<sup>1</sup>

This article presents a summary of the key developmental events and challenges facing Army members during their late thirties and early forties so as to facilitate their own contingency planning for the central campaign of adult development at mid-life, or, in the case of those senior officers who have already negotiated these shoals, to better understand the predicaments of their subordinates. A crucial sequence of career events circumscribes and complicates this period of an officer's life—a period of major physiological, emotional, and social transformations. How well we anticipate, plan for, and subsequently manage the mid-life transition will determine the structure of our later lives, both personally and professionally, and will affect our own performance as well as that of the units we lead before, during, and after the transition.

Perhaps more than any other period of our lives, the transition from young adulthood to middle age is shadowed in myth, fear, and uncertainty. What are the rites of passage that allow us to legitimately assume the social roles and personal identities

of mature adults? How must our self-concepts change to accommodate the realities of biological aging, altered expectations, and persistent age-biased norms? How can we bring a sense of harmony to our lives when we begin to view life as "the time remaining"? What are the values and goals that will guide our behavior as senior members of society and our profession? How will our views of work change? And how must we revise our life structure—the basic pattern or design of a person's life at a given time—to insure a rewarding match between ourselves as individuals and our dynamic sociocultural environment?

Who we are at any moment is a product of our interpretation of the past, our perception of the present, and our expectations for the future. Human development is a lifelong process of responding to change, and we are likely to grow most dramatically in response to disharmony among the many competing demands of our lives. During times of transition, biological and social aging will precipitate a developmental crisis if we allow uncontrolled and uncoordinated change to overtax our ability to cope. For the military officer in particular, the mid-life transition is a high-risk period.

## CHALLENGES OF ADULT DEVELOPMENT TO MID-LIFE

To fully understand the issues of the mid-life transition, we need to review those events and developmental tasks that occupied us during the first 15 to 18 years of our

military careers. Dr. Daniel Levinson's model of the adult life cycle provides a framework for this analysis.

Between 17 and 22 years of age, we must organize our value and belief systems, prepare for economic and emotional independence from our family, and begin seriously investigating life's options. As part of this transition, we make an initial occupational choice. For most of us, this period includes our pre-commissioning training and military education.

Around 22 years of age, we enter the adult world and build an initial adult life structure. Levinson suggests that four interdependent tasks must be accomplished, each affecting our evolving life structure: forming an occupation, forming mentor

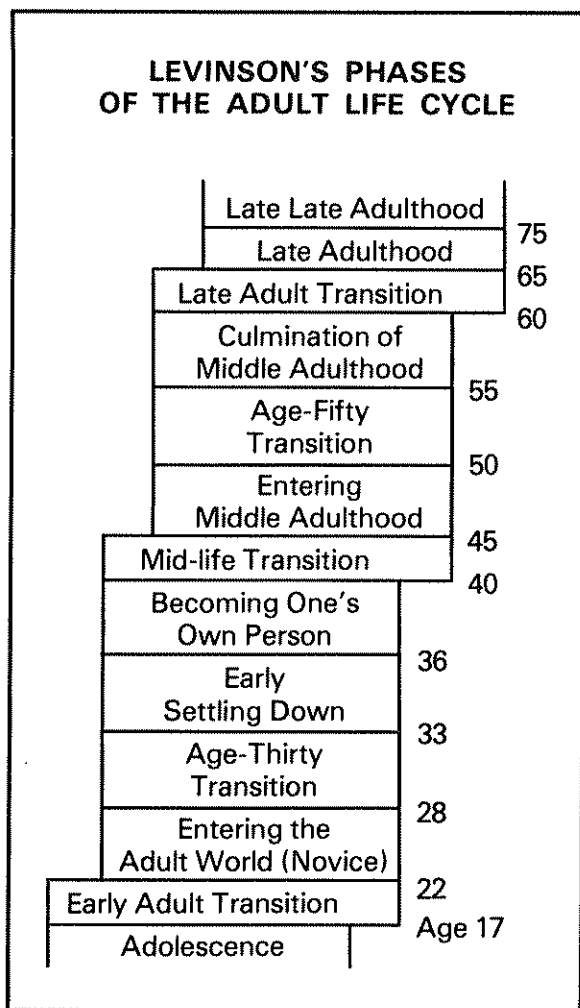
relationships, forming love relationships, and forming the "Dream."

As young officers, professional and organizational expectations set the boundaries for forming our occupational orientation. Branch and specialty, assignments and schooling, duties and responsibilities, peers, subordinates, and superiors influence our professional development. Ideally, we internalize desired values, discover career anchors and work preferences, and expand our professional knowledge and skills. If we are lucky, one or more senior officers will take a special interest in us and act as our mentors by guiding, encouraging, and facilitating our development as officers.

If we haven't already made our choice of romantic partners, we will form a series of love relationships, one of which may evolve into marriage. This intimate partnership is the most important rival to our career for time and energy, and simultaneously our most consistent reservoir of strength and support for that career.

All the developmental tasks of the novice period focus from Levinson's concept of the Dream. Incorporating career, family, and personal aspirations, the Dream "is a vague sense of self-in-adult world. It has the quality of a vision, an imagined possibility that generates excitement and vitality."<sup>2</sup> As a young officer, our Dream may include images of personal power and influence, of high rank and esteem, of service and dedication, and of excitement, accomplishment, and happiness. We see ourselves vaguely as complete adults in control of our destinies and directing the destinies of others. The Dream blends illusions with objective realities and includes specific and generalized goals and social roles that inspire us and energize our actions.

Around age 28, we enter the age-thirty transition. During this five-year period of reassessment, confusion, and anticipation, we evaluate previous career choices, personal commitments, and potential options. We modify or confirm values and beliefs and consider changing those aspects of our life structure with which we are dissatisfied. We



begin to feel the pressure of passing time. Many mid-career resignations are probably the product of this self-assessment process, which represents the individual's need, as Dr. Roger Gould says, "to open up to what's inside."

We emerge from the age-thirty transition somewhat shaken, for the world isn't exactly as we had envisioned it. In the period of settling down, we build on the decisions of the transition, both personally and professionally. This period requires us to make repeated critical resource-allocation choices. What priority should, can, and will we place on the competing demands for our time, energy, and commitment? Our profession expects first priority; yet family and community also deserve their fair measure. We must achieve an acceptable balance among the status, prestige, power, and achievement needs anchored in our professional lives, on one hand, and the nurturant, introspective, and interpersonal growth of our private lives, on the other.

Between ages 36 and 40, our apprenticeship is coming to a close. We seek to achieve full adult independence and social affirmation. The self-as-adult vision of our twenties, as revised during the age-thirty transition, now appears within reach. Professionally, we are on the threshold of senior-partner status.

#### THE MILITARY MID-LIFE TRANSITION

Given our current personnel management system, the period of an officer's career between 16 and 23 years of service is one of constant organizational review and potentially high individual stress. The opportunities, disappointments, conflicts, and achievements of our early careers are repeatedly assessed by anonymous others, and we await each of their judgments anxiously: Will my name be on the next list? Our professional identities and self-concepts are so interwoven that selection or passover becomes a measure of our total worth. Levinson coined the phrase "culminating event" to describe that experience which

symbolizes for each of us the realization of the Dream of young adulthood and which signals the end of the period of becoming one's own person and the beginning of the mid-life transition.

According to Levinson, during our late thirties each person:

wants desperately to be affirmed by society in the role that he values most. He is trying for that crucial promotion or recognition. At about age 40 . . . most . . . fix on some key event in their careers as carrying the ultimate message of their affirmation or devaluation by society. . . . This event is given a magical quality. If the outcome is favorable, one imagines, then all is well and the future is assured. If it is unfavorable, the man feels that not only his work but he as a person has been found wanting and without value.<sup>3</sup>

Four key career events, individually or in any combination, may have this "magical quality," depending on the individual's aspirations, needs, and self-perceived potential: promotion to lieutenant colonel, selection for and completion of battalion-level command or similar duty, selection for colonel, and selection for attendance at a senior service college. Realization of the latter two may vary in sequence and occur well into the developmental challenges of mid-life; that may help explain the responses of the officer and his or her family to these experiences. In the context of adult development, either selection or non-selection and subsequent "living through" have serious consequences.

In contrast to promotion and key assignments, retirement after 20 years of service is probably not a culminating event. Rather, retirement is one possible response to our individual assessment of having reached the 20-year plateau and to having completed our young-adult era. The possibility of retirement and the beginning of a second career represent an option that may hamper or facilitate the successful completion of the developmental tasks of mid-life.

Levinson asserts that a person's reaction to the culminating event is heavily influenced

AGE	LEVINSON'S PHASES	CAREER STAGES	GOALS	TASKS
50	Entering Middle Adulthood	Brigade-level Command Senior-level Staff	Exercise Power with Justice Achieve Generativity Build Integrated Life Structure Form Integrated Self-concept Build Second Career	Evaluate Mid-life Structure Accept Mortality Adjust to Aging Parents Begin Full Mentoring Help Teenagers Become Adults Improve Personal Relationships
45	Mid-life Transition (Crisis)	Begin Senior Field Grade Initial & Alternate Specialty Utilization 20-year Retirement Point Senior Service College Plan for Retirement & Second Career	Initiate Changes in Life Structure for Middle Adulthood Achieve De-illusionment	Pursue the Mature Dream Make Crucial Life Decisions Assess Professional & Personal Relationships Resolve Self-concept Polarities Review Early Adulthood
40	Becoming One's Own Person	Battalion-level Command & Major Staff Duties Dual Skill Development & Utilization	Realization of the Dream Achieve Full Independence & Social Affirmation Become Full-fledged Adult	Recognize Culminating Event Seek Increased Autonomy & Responsibility Revise Mentor Relationships Resolve Family/Work Conflicts Pursue Career Goals
36	Early Settling Down	Command & General Staff College Level Schooling	Confirm New Stable Life Structure Establish Niche in Society	Form Roots & Commitments Recognize Civic & Social Responsibilities Develop Career & Outside Interests
33				

by when it occurs in the transitional process, and he presents five sequences which development may follow at mid-life: (1) breaking out in an attempt to form a new life structure; (2) advancement within a stable life structure; (3) advancement which itself produces a change in life structure; (4) serious failure or decline within a stable life structure; and (5) continuing an unstable life structure. The first three of these sequences seem to offer the best chances for a successful military mid-life transition. Perhaps they can best be illustrated by presenting composite case studies, a method often used by life-cycle researchers. The following examples, though fictitious, are based on well-butressed theory and empirical research.

#### Breaking Out

Lieutenant Colonel Bob Wilson is 42 years old. Bob, his wife Betty, and their two teenage children are a typical military family with a history of dedicated service, frequent

moves, and a couple of assignment-induced separations. Early in his career, Bob dreamed of commanding a battalion and then a brigade. During his early thirties, he became interested in journalism, and his choice of the public affairs specialty and subsequent graduate education allowed him to pursue this interest.

At age 38, after a tour as a public information officer, Bob was promoted with his peers to lieutenant colonel. He did not, however, get selected for battalion command. It was a shock, and although Bob didn't realize it at the time, this disappointment was the catalyst for his mid-life reassessment. His professional commitment and performance began to slump. He became increasingly preoccupied with illness, disability, and death—particularly his own. He progressively withdrew from non-family relationships and fell back on his family as a stable refuge, only to discover a distressing ambivalence. For the first time, his wife's primacy in the management of family affairs

and his children's failure to conform to his concept of their proper roles became threatening. He found himself regarded not as a source of strength and wisdom, but as a person in need of care and protection.<sup>4</sup>

Bob found his feelings summarized in a career development bulletin: "For those whose lives have represented continuous strivings for power, strength, and control, abandonment of these goals may feel like a kind of death."<sup>5</sup> With his dream of command shattered, Bob seriously considered retirement at 20 years of service.

At this point, Bob and his family entered the first of three stages of the "retirement syndrome." This, a two- to three-year period of readjustment prior to retirement, is characterized by regrets and fears of the impending loss of a way of life that has proven both secure and satisfying, as well as by hopes and expectations for a new civilian life.<sup>6</sup>

Bob realized that he could be at the peak of his effectiveness and utility to the military, but that between 40 and 45 he might also be most successful in adjusting to a new career. He needed a greater degree of stability for his family and in his work. Bob's goals had always been shaped by the intrinsic satisfactions of his work and the potential for personal growth and advancement. While these remained important, he felt a need to contribute to the community and a need to play a more active role in his children's lives. Journalism, Bob decided, was the career that now offered him the best chance to satisfy all his needs. Betty supported his decision. She had delayed returning to her career as a designer to serve Bob's career in the complementary roles of homemaker and companion. Betty, too, felt the incipient demands of her own mid-life transition.

Bob sought and received an assignment as an ROTC Assistant Professor of Military Science in an area chosen to suit the family's present and future needs. Without neglecting his military duties, Bob began teaching journalism at a junior college and writing for publication. By building the foundation for a second career on his military experience, he was able to devote more time to his children

(on their terms, not his) and to share more equitably household duties now that Betty was working. His well-internalized work ethic had been tempered by the realization that leisure and work should complement one another, and that to be a truly mature individual he must allow his nurturant and introspective sides to emerge.<sup>7</sup>

When he retires at 43, Bob's mid-life transition will not be over. He and his family will still face changes in status, social identity, and style of life. To help smooth the transition, Bob became active in local civic and public service groups, for these activities satisfied his growing interest in the future and his desire to leave a legacy, while also anchoring the family to the community. In Bob's case, the developmental demands of mid-life and the challenges of beginning a new life are interdependent and, by design, mutually supportive.

#### Advancement Within

Unlike Bob, Colonel Jerry Johnson is a "comer," a member of the "emerging elite," as Dr. Sam Sarkesian calls those who have stars in their futures. Jerry received an accelerated promotion to lieutenant colonel, successfully commanded a line battalion, was promoted to colonel, and is now attending the Army War College. His son Tad is an ROTC scholarship student. His wife Judy is a senior surgical nurse whose career has not suffered from the family's mobility. For 21 years, their marriage has been a dual-career masterpiece, with each contributing fully to parenting and household responsibilities.

Commanding his battalion had been the realization of Jerry's Dream, but surrendering command and turning 40 in the same month had been distressing. Jerry's reaction to his command experience, like that of so many others, was a mixture of pleasure and regret. As Levinson points out,

Occasionally the culminating event is a great success both externally and in the man's private experience. . . . [But] the great majority of men experienced this event as a failure or a flawed success . . . [although] in

the eyes of others it was often quite favorable. But in certain crucial respects it was blemished, it did not sustain all the special hopes he had had in mind.<sup>8</sup>

Part of his disappointment, Jerry realized, was the result of overestimating the changes he could make in his 18-month command tour. He had not had the level of autonomy he had expected. Jerry knew he had often been unable to distinguish between those things he should have done as a commander and those he wanted to do as a soldier and leader. This was his chance, and he wanted to be involved in everything. Consequently, he had lost control of his own time.

Preoccupied with achieving his Dream and facing the most demanding and crucial test of his worthiness for greater responsibility, Jerry had violated one of the principles he had tried to teach his subordinates: "The true measure of professionalism should be who you are and how well you do your job, not who you are becoming and what you are doing."<sup>9</sup> He had helped some young officers and NCOs develop as leaders, but not to the degree he could have had he been more concerned about them and less occupied with insuring that no major foulups occurred. Is it unreasonable to expect a person in his late thirties who is striving for professional recognition to dedicate large amounts of his time and energy to helping others develop their potential? Maybe, but isn't that what being a military leader is all about?

Jerry's next assignment, in the Pentagon, caused him to evaluate further the life structure he had built as a young adult. For the first time in his career, Jerry felt a lack of personal pride, little job satisfaction, and deep resentment.<sup>10</sup> His family life suffered. Having been told that he was one of the best, he wondered why the military establishment appeared to be making few efforts to make him feel special and important. Many of his peers were retiring to accept lucrative civilian positions.<sup>11</sup> Were his values and beliefs obsolete? Was his dedication foolishly built on illusions?

At the War College, Jerry watched his classmates for signs of the developmental struggle for mid-life identity which he was still waging. He found most classmates responding to their alternating feelings of youth, old age, and being in-between with renewed concern for physical fitness, appearance, and sexual performance. He sensed their fearful reactions to the heart attack of a peer and wondered if these fears of death were related to their frantic strivings for creativity. He watched with amusement as "macho" types discovered the very real and positive feminine side of their natures. And he empathized with those who suffered without resolution the opposing needs for attachment and independence in their personal lives.<sup>12</sup>

After the brigade command list, which included his name, was published, Jerry was shocked to find that 21 percent of those selected turned down command.<sup>13</sup> Why? No one seemed to know, but Jerry suspected that the real reason was a shift in values toward a less competitive mode of work, coupled with desires for a more stable family life and a greater degree of personal freedom and autonomy.

Jerry would accept his command, but with a new awareness of his limitations and strengths. He had revised his Dream and had begun to build an integrated life structure anchored in reality and a desire to broaden his interests. His mid-life transition reflected the process Levinson calls "de-illusionment." Jerry realized that his idealized picture of himself as all-knowing, all-capable, and

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always young must be exchanged for a more honest view of himself and his world, but without surrendering to cynicism. He had gained a disciplined enthusiasm that we might rightfully call maturity.

#### Advancement to Change

Lieutenant Colonel Doug Donner is a technician, a thinker, a concepts man. He's fond of saying, "I'm more comfortable around machines than people—machines are predictable." At 41, Doug became the deputy project manager for a major electronics component of a new weapon system. It was a position he had long hoped for. His boss, a "people person," delegated much of the technical responsibilities to Doug, who gladly accepted the challenge. He was doing what he liked best and didn't have to worry about the human factor.

For 18 months the partnership worked well. Then, without much warning, his boss retired, and Doug found himself in charge of a dying project (technical advances and cost overruns on other components were blamed) and of the people involved in it. The hollow promotion to project manager was compounded by his passover for promotion to colonel. Pressured by a growing sense of insecurity, Doug considered retirement.

Doug realized that transferability of skills was a key factor in a successful move to the civilian sector. His commitment to the military had always been nurtured by favorable experiences resulting from the application of his skills. Could he "sell" himself and bargain for wages and a position he would be satisfied with? Would he be frustrated by movement downward or even horizontally in status as a civilian? He might well have to begin again at the bottom of a status hierarchy.<sup>14</sup> Doug's wife Lori sensed his loss of self-confidence and gently encouraged him to continue his military career, even as his project was terminated.

Doug was offered and accepted a temporary assignment as an assistant inspector general. Although not intended by the Army as a means to revitalize a "plateaued" officer, this short-term reassignment had just that effect on Doug.

Both his frustrations as a project manager and an inner demand to grow caused Doug to want to understand people better. The tasks of investigation, accommodation, inspection, and counseling challenged Doug to develop long-dormant skills. Helping others required him to use his conceptual and analytical abilities in new ways. It also forced him to cope with the conflicting emotions he felt and to form a new, more authentic concept of who he should be. He would become an excellent mentor.

Doug's promotion to colonel came as something of a surprise. He had accepted the role of "second stringer" gracefully, pursuing a relatively noncompetitive but highly professional work pattern, a normal family life, and a growing number of authentic friendships.<sup>15</sup> Maybe someone had realized that the talent drain and growing retirement costs could be slowed if promotion possibilities remained for older officers.<sup>16</sup> Industry, he discovered, had begun to recognize the value of experience and mature judgment. Retirement at about 50 would still offer him opportunities for a meaningful second career.<sup>17</sup>

At 46, Doug accepted a project managership. Unlike some of his peers, he considered himself a successful man. He had achieved more than most of his contemporaries. His mid-life transition had changed him. He now balanced efforts to produce a quality program with efforts to guide and assist the careers of younger officers. The technician had grown up.<sup>18</sup>

#### WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

Since we can neither foresee nor control all the forces that produce our actual scheme of maneuver through life, our Dream is like a tentative plan—built on assumptions, available facts, and our current life structure. It must be revised as conditions change. And while there are unique career and personal experiences that influence our development as soldiers, the challenges of adult development at mid-life are universal.

The objective of adult development is to achieve an acceptable person-environment



fit, that is, to build a stable life structure for ourselves that provides satisfaction and autonomy. To secure this objective at mid-life, we must reassess the illusions and fantasies of our youthful self-concept, retaining only those rooted in reality. We must accept the inevitability of our own slow physical decline and ultimate death, without forgetting that health and vitality can last a lifetime. We must consider our mode of life and our intimate relationships, measuring our needs for "things worth having" versus "things worth being." We must determine our own mixture of security and freedom and establish a new balance among work, family, and personal needs. We must recognize our limitations and our strengths, adopting the latter as both our standards for self-evaluation and our chief resources for solving life's dilemmas. Finally, we must continuously review our goals and values, for these will ultimately guide our development still to come.

**L**ife-cycle research has shown that we face developmental challenges regardless of our age. As people who make and implement policy, we must recognize that the adult development tasks facing others may well be different from those we are currently experiencing. If we are to lead effectively and guide the professional development of our soldiers, we must understand the dominant issues of the current stages of their lives. This is clearly part of the principle of leadership, "Know your soldiers."

In addition to our individual efforts toward understanding human development, there are some institutional changes we can promote to enhance organizational performance and career satisfaction. First, instruction and discussion of adult developmental issues should be incorporated into leadership and manpower management programs at each level of professional education, with the focus on problems peculiar to the age range of the students. Second, we should reconsider the pattern of military careers in light of the findings of life-cycle research, paying particular attention to the timing of command opportunities and other key assignments. Third, we should

consider retention of junior officers, mid-career resignations, early retirements, and rejection of command opportunities as human development issues and shape our corrective efforts accordingly. Finally, we should encourage and support individual life and career planning, particularly in the years prior to retirement.

Ultimately, each of us is responsible for our own development throughout adulthood. It is our good fortune that the military profession requires us to grow, to adapt, and to innovate. Life itself requires no more and certainly no less.

#### NOTES

1. The phenomenon of distinct stages of adult development first received wide public notice as a result of Gail Sheehy's *Passages: Predictable Crises in Adult Life* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1974).

2. Daniel J. Levinson, *The Seasons of a Man's Life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1978), p. 91.

3. Daniel J. Levinson, et al., "Stages of Adulthood," in *Socialization and the Life Cycle*, ed. Peter I. Rose (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1979), p. 288.

4. Stanley D. Rosenberg and Michael P. Farrell, "Changes at Midlife: A Pattern of Psychosocial Decline," *The Career Development Bulletin*, 1 (No. 2, 1979), 15-16.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 16.

6. John S. McNeil, "Individual and Family Problems Related to Retirement from the Military," in *Families in the Military System*, ed. Hamilton S. McCubbin, et al. (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1976), pp. 238-39.

7. Roger L. Gould, *Transformations: Growth and Change in Adult Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978), p. 240.

8. Levinson, *The Seasons of a Man's Life*, p. 201.

9. Andrew L. Bacevich Jr., "Progressivism, Professionalism, and Reform," *Parameters*, 9 (March 1979), 66-71.

10. Dandridge M. Malone, "The Prize," *Army*, 23 (March 1973), 24-31.

11. Sam C. Sarkesian, *The Professional Army Officer in a Changing Society* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1975), p. 178.

12. "Individuation" is the formal term for the process of resolving these four "coexisting polarities" of the self and the achievement of an authentic middle adulthood self-concept.

13. Colonel Robert E. Moss, telephone conversation with author, October 1979. Colonel Moss is a member of the Army War College faculty and was study advisor to a student group researching the phenomenon of rejection of command by senior officers.

14. McNeil, p. 240.

15. Sarkesian, p. 49.

16. Lynn D. Smith, "The Middle Manager Drain: A Self-inflicted Wound," *Army*, 27 (November 1977), 30-32.

17. Stanley M. Davis, "Challenging the Myth about Age and Performance," *The Career Development Bulletin*, 1 (No. 2, 1979), 13.

18. "Generativity" is the term used to describe the special concern for the future of mid-life adults. Efforts to guide and foster the growth of following generations and to leave a legacy are seen as the central developmental challenges of mid-life.