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Junior Officer Development: Reflections of an Old Fud

MARK R. HAMILTON

Soldiers are fond of recalling how things used to be. Part of this is a healthy, deeply felt affection for the common heritage which bonds the members of our profession so closely. If we can refrain from the temptation to romanticize our experience or gloss over negative aspects of the past, such a look back can serve usefully as a kind of long-term after-action review. A review of this nature will show a marked disjunct between the career experience patterns of today's senior officers (principally senior lieutenant colonels through generals), on one hand, and those of the officers coming up behind them, on the other. To put it another way, the commonality of formative approach, method, and convention that prevailed across all the ranks when I was a young officer seems to be disappearing. The continuities are simply no longer there, so that very soon a rather wide experiential gulf will exist between the senior generation and the one that follows it.

The gulf has developed so gradually and imperceptibly, however, that today we seniors think we have something we do not. We think we have an officer corps whose junior officers know what we knew at their career juncture and who have had the experiences we had as junior officers. Our misapprehension comes from a failure to reflect on officer development opportunities existing then and now.

Our junior officers today are as eager and capable as ever. I would rather go to war with the units I have served in over the last ten years than the units I served in for the first ten years. Still, I think that conditions have produced a very different junior officer, and it's not all good news.

Believe me, there is a lot of good news. I believe that the desirability of being an officer today is higher than in the fabled good old days. I believe the competition to earn a commission is tougher. I believe that the formal training programs are better, more professional, more thorough—from ROTC summer camp to the officer basic course. I don't believe that Ranger School

could have become any tougher, but then my recollections there are near ancient history and shouldn't be trusted. Thus there is lots of good news! The other news begins when these junior officers come to you and me, to the commanders in the field. There, the experience of junior officers is remarkably different from that shared by all of those officers now in brigade command and higher, and even from that shared by many of our serving battalion commanders. In order to explain, I am forced to several generalizations, recognizing of course that the Army experiences change at different rates between Korea and Germany, or even among stateside posts.

In the middle to late 1960s the experience of a junior officer was very much an apprenticeship. It was rich and varied, and it was very different from the experience of a junior officer today. First, that junior officer of yesteryear was a teacher. He was expected to gather the references, prepare a detailed lesson plan (to be placed in a neat and visible stack at the back of the classroom for the inevitable inspection of the class), and serve as the subject-matter expert for each of the several classes he was assigned to teach in a given week of training. I don't exalt the technique. It was for the most part centralized classroom training that has now been replaced—thankfully—with far more productive hands-on, small-group, performance-oriented training. But however bad the pedagogical technique may have been for the soldier, it was great training for the junior officer. He was exposed to the requirement to become intimately familiar with a variety of subjects and made to demonstrate his proficiency in front of class inspectors. That opportunity no longer exists to anywhere near the extent or variety it once did. Much of the teaching now rests firmly in the capable hands of our noncommissioned officers, who do it superbly. Still, there is the loss of opportunity for junior officers. Further, in pursuit of the old-time centralized classroom training sessions, the unit was marched from place to place. The man in charge of the close order drill associated with that marching was a junior officer. Other junior officers (officers were required to attend most of the training classes) fell in at the back of the formation and marched as well. So, through teaching, attending, doing, and directing the close order drill, the junior officer gained experiences that are seldom replicated today.

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Next, he was an inspector, or at least an assistant inspector or close witness to the in-ranks inspections, room inspections, and equipment layouts. This was a WEEKLY event. It happened on Saturday mornings. He inspected rifles and uniforms, rooms and equipment. He met the soldiers eye to eye, exacted standards, recorded shortfalls, rewarded excellence. After the inspections came officers call. It was common for officers call to occur once or twice a week during the week as well. Today we might call these after-action reviews, although they were not so well run as I recall. Typically, these took place in a mess hall over coffee and doughnuts. It never occurred to me who paid for these repasts, and I know we never signed a meal count. I think the mess sergeant must have had a freer rein than he does today. At these events, we would review what had taken place during the past several days, put out the directives for the days to follow, and recall with great levity the foibles of some poor lieutenant who had managed to make himself famous recently. I now know that what was going on is called "bonding." Then I only knew that I felt part of a brotherhood that was somehow separate and different and important. Officers today can still be inspectors, but the formal, weekly opportunity to do so is not present in the training scheme of most units.

Next, the junior officer of those days filled a variety of additional-duty jobs which were far more nearly his real duty than the TOE position to which he was nominally assigned. The lists of these additional duties were legendary for both their length and, to some extent, their absurd variety. True, a number of these duties were of the eyewash variety, of value only to prove to various inspection agencies that there was indeed an officer assigned, on orders, as the unit rodent control officer, or some such thing. But others of these duties confronted the designated officer with the requirement to become familiar with seemingly mundane but actually important aspects of military responsibility. Two of the more common and beneficial of these duties were those of safety officer and pay officer. As a safety officer in the artillery, for example, he was uniquely responsible for the accurate lay of the unit and each quadrant, deflection, and charge that was fired. His duties were specific and exacting. His expertise and authority were real and unchallenged.

Am I suggesting that we return to the age of safety officers? No. That is not training as we will fight. It is important for us to realize, however, that there was a great deal of hands-on training involved in that particular role. There was a degree of authority felt and exercised. There was an involvement in the specific details and mechanics of fundamental soldier skills, regardless of the TOE position to which that officer might have been assigned. Most senior officers would agree that some of the finest duty they have had is in serving as the evaluator for another unit's ARTEP exercise or the like. The opportunity to observe the operations of a unit for which one is not directly responsible allows objective distance and unencumbered time to make notes and comparisons which may be applied to one's own unit. Safety officers had such opportunities in every unit and on every range they worked.

Duty as the unit pay officer afforded the officer a face-to-face meeting with virtually every enlisted man in the command, revealed pay problems firsthand, and familiarized him with the marital status, leave status, dependent status, and morale of the soldiers. Over the course of several years, this duty shifted from platoon leader to company executive officer to company commander; thus some of us had the chance to reap the benefits of this practice over a long period. Sure, in this age of computerized efficiency, check-to-bank is the way to go, but let us not forget that there were very real leader-development benefits in the old system. As teacher, as inspector, as safety officer, as pay officer, the junior officer practiced the role of an authority and expert. These now-lost experiences helped to shape the way he felt about himself and his role as a commissioned officer.

Other opportunities have been lost as well. A large portion of the Army today has gone "light," and may go lighter still. These units offer the extreme examples of the lost opportunities afforded today's junior officers. Similar losses are evident across the entire force, but not quite as acute as in the light divisions. Our junior officers cannot be company-level supply officers in the light divisions; there is no such position. They cannot be company-level motor officers; that position does not exist either. That is just as well in one sense, since there is only one mechanic. There is no TOE position for maintenance management or repair part management. In fact there is no battalion-level motor officer. Nor is there an assistant S-1 or assistant S-4 at brigade level.

It is not my purpose here to second-guess the TOE of the light division. It was put together by great soldiers who were working under remarkable constraints. I simply am highlighting the loss of opportunity for the professional development of our junior officers. Obviously, it is not necessary for every officer to have served in all of these subsidiary roles if Western civilization is to be saved. However, I remain uncomfortable with the

prospect that soon we will be forming battalion staffs composed of officers ~~not a single one of whom has ever previously served in a subaltern position~~ on a battalion or brigade staff. Such a situation was virtually impossible in the heavy force of the past.

Apprentice positions used to exist and were filled by junior officers. Many positions that really didn't exist (assistant S-1 at battalion, assistant assistant S-3, etc.) were also filled by junior officers. How was this possible? Well, first of all, liaison officers didn't do much liaising and were thus available for other tasks. The comparison between the old Forward Observer and the current Fire Support Team (FIST) lieutenant is not even close. Today's battalion FIST officer (also true of air defense, engineer, and others) is a full-time representative with the supported force or is directly, fully involved in the training of his team. These officers used to be "extras" who were primarily used in the kinds of duty positions outlined above. I'm glad that has changed. We do have to realize, however, that there has been such a change.

In general, organizational evolution has been characterized by consolidation of staff functions at higher echelons, shift of heavier weapon systems to higher echelons, and the elimination of positions due to equipment modernization (recon and survey officer as an example). We cannot be satisfied with the false dilemma which asks, "Would you rather have an officer who knows supply procedures or one who can properly advise a maneuver commander on the use of his engineer assets?" Clearly, we need both skills. We need several skills within the same officer. Yesterday's junior officers were not supermen. They were simply officers who had (in some cases for the wrong reasons) a great variety of experiences during their junior officer years.

Pick half a dozen officers at the Army War College and you will be amazed at the enormously wide spectrum of their collective experiences. One or two will have been motor officers, perhaps at company and battalion levels; one or two will have been supply officers; all will have been safety officers and pay officers; all will have taught a multitude of classes in a formal classroom environment. Such breadth of experience is not a function of their having been in the service longer. They will have had these experiences as company grade officers. It is ironic that these officers will have served far fewer years in the rank of lieutenant, where such experience is to be gained, than today's junior officer (total years as a company grade are similar). Typically, they will have moved around a great deal compared with those of today. Many of these seniors will have reached the rank of lieutenant colonel before they had more years in the Army than PCSs. They will have held several apprentice duties, but for short periods of time.

This kind of jumping about from job to job has been roundly criticized, perhaps justifiably so. Still, it is interesting to note that such rotation is precisely the technique used in training a doctor during his residency. With

longer tours and more stability come great benefits in terms of force management economies, job realization, and family contentment. A price to be paid is an officer who has served in fewer duty positions, worked for fewer bosses, been at fewer posts. It is now altogether possible that an officer with ten years of service has been to only two Army posts (except for branch schooling) and only one type of division. Is that good or bad? It certainly is different from past patterns, and the differences inevitably produce differences in officer development.

In case you haven't asked yet—so what? I believe there is a so what. Accurate and efficient communications depend to a great extent on a shared repository of experience. This common repository provides the content and the metaphors of idea exchange. In no profession is the accuracy of that exchange more important than in the profession of arms. For many years the military changed sufficiently slowly that we could assume our subordinates had had about the same experiences as we. But we can no longer make such an assumption. When most serving brigade commanders first encountered the military, at West Point or in ROTC, the Second World War had been over for 18 years. The end of the Vietnam War now lies some 17 years in the past. Yet these two periods, almost the same in terms of length, are quite different in terms of the degree of institutional change they engendered. The subject of cultural change has been explored in numerous recent works. A particularly provocative example is the book *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know* (Houghton Mifflin, 1987) by E. D. Hirsch, Jr. Here, the author outlines the very real difficulties faced by a culture which no longer shares a common body of experience and knowledge. Today, a division commander, giving guidance to a brigade commander who passes it to a battalion commander, may proceed on the reasonable assumption that each officer in that chain of command has had very similar developmental experiences. In just a few years that will not be the case.

I'm not going to bemoan the passing of Vietnam-era officers, although that will occur. Honestly, I think that Vietnam War experiences, by

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virtue of the infinite variety of the geography and of the evolutions of the struggle itself, were so diverse that participation in the war is not the most important of common professional bonds. But there is no denying that these officers form a highly bonded group. They are bonded by the common junior officer experiences recounted earlier. They are bonded by the extraordinary trials they faced during the early 1970s, when large groups of American society challenged their professional legitimacy, when command, control, and discipline of troops were extremely tenuous, when time-in-grade lengthened and reductions in force were de rigueur. They looked such trials full in the eye and said, "I'll stay." These officers, collectively, are a national treasure. Their common bond is, in my opinion, the unspoken foundation for the magnificent command climate that permeates our Army today.

Those who follow, though later, are not lesser. As a group, their grasp of tactics and techniques, understanding of the combined arms team, familiarity with military history, and state of physical conditioning and health habits exceed my own at their rank, and probably that of most of my contemporaries as well. Still, I feel that they are being shortchanged in acquiring the breadth of developmental experience we need in our corps of officers. These shortchanges have combined to alter, not all that subtly, the makeup of today's junior officer. With no chance, or at least far fewer chances, to be a motor officer, mess officer, supply officer, inspector in ranks, property book officer, and on and on, today's junior officer simply has more areas with which he has no familiarity. And I think we all tend to avoid involvement in areas we are less familiar with.

Well, what do we do about it? First, we must recognize that there is a difference. I would hope the foregoing discussion has established the existence of such a difference to some degree. Second, we must think creatively, remaining alert to situations where we can contrive opportunities for offering comparable formative experience even though there are no longer formal institutional occasions. Third, we must build on the unique expertise and experience of today's junior officers that sets them apart from their seniors.

The purpose of generating developmental opportunities is to provide the essential familiarity and competence that lead to confidence. We need to establish in our units (this is not a job for TRADOC) specific programs aimed at giving junior officers experience and expertise in maintenance management, repair parts management, and the detailed inspection of key pieces of equipment. This process has to go beyond the preventive maintenance checks and services expected of our drivers; it should include troubleshooting and basic-to-intermediate maintenance standards familiarity: What is the part called? How do you know it's broken? What will happen if it isn't fixed? We

need to create the opportunities for young officers to learn to conduct the inspections of rifles, individual equipment, and vehicles. I don't want to take this function away from the capable hands of NCOs, but neither do I want a generation of officers who have never done these things themselves. Show them messhall operations. You may have to go to brigade level to find a messhall, but it is worth the trip. Take them behind the counters, show them the paper work. This is not a tourist visit. They are going to have to spend several hours to get even a feel. Take them to a court-martial room. The last time any officer other than a JAG officer was a trial counsel or assistant defense counsel was 1968. It is still theoretically possible, but no one does it because of possible challenges. A little thought will reveal other areas of needed junior officer competency formerly acquired pro forma, but now denied by changes in the institutional culture. It is surprising how many of the areas once deemed minimum-essential officer experience are no longer common experience, even among field grades.

Further, we need to capitalize upon those areas of junior officer experience that *have* become common. Junior officers are fully involved in tactics, field techniques, military history, and training the force. Seniors can learn from and participate with them, thus extending the areas of commonality that bridge the generations. I said earlier that I would rather go to war with the units of today than with those I grew up with. The units of today are better at higher-level collective skills. They will fight better for the first ten days of the next war. But I have nagging doubts about the longer term, the time when, as Clausewitz says, "The machine itself will begin to resist." During the inevitably degraded mode which characterizes long-term combat, knowledge of the thousand details becomes the currency of success. Then, the classes we once taught on headspacing and timing of the .50 caliber machine gun let us see, fix, or at least appreciate immediate problems with organic fire support. Knowledge of the TOE from long days in supply or as property book officer equips us with the principles to guide our unit reconstitution efforts. At crucial moments of life or death, of mission success or mission failure, the question directed at the leader will no longer be, "How's it going today, 'L.T.'?" The question will be: "Sir, what should we do?" The right answer will come from leaders who do not see themselves simply as cogs within a specialized team, but rather as teachers and authorities, with experience and competencies that extend far down from the generalized perspective of their current command echelon. The enviable success of German forces during World War II in reconstituting shattered forces and fighting well another day stemmed, in large part, from the cultural and professional reality (and perception) that the German officer from top to bottom was an authority and expert. If that is the sort of officer we need in our own army today, we simply cannot afford to labor under the misapprehension we are producing him when in fact we are not. □