

“Train Hard, Fight Easy”

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IS A LACK OF TRAINING IN THE ROYAL AIR FORCE LEADING TO UNACCEPTABLE STRESS IN THE AIR TRANSPORT AND HELICOPTER FLEETS ?

INTRODUCTION

During the ‘Cold War’ everything seemed so deadly simple. Warsaw Pact forces were the enemy and NATO the good guys. Planning was based on a 30 day all-out effort after which we had either won or gone nuclear. Remember Flexible Response? This provided a level of certainty, personnel, squadrons and aircraft all had clear roles and all training was conducted within a clear framework.

Outside their NATO commitments, formations and personnel were sometimes assigned to Out Of Area operations (OOA) in support of UK national interests; the UN, Falklands, and various garrison duties falling into these latter categories. Often, as in the Falklands and Iraq (1991) wars, units and formations had to be released from NATO assignments in order to be reassigned elsewhere. But, generally, these were wars for which the NATO training prepared them well.

Today, without the certainties of the Cold War, operations are much more “come as you are” affairs. Expeditionary warfare against an unanticipated enemy makes training far more problematic but even more crucial - given that British foreign policy has UK armed forces involved in ‘asymmetric’ conflicts worldwide, and currently fighting in high intensity conflicts on two fronts.

Troops and weapons platforms must, of course, be Combat Ready(CR), but for what task and in what configuration? With the Defence Budget now at its lowest level as a percentage of GDP, the RAF continues to reduce in size whilst commitments have increased. Too few men for too many commitments inevitably means that training suffers. In some instances, trade group by trade group, reductions in RAF manpower have made it almost impossible for some individuals to train adequately unless they give up their well-earned respite time between incessant tours of duty overseas.

Though many of these pressures can be managed in the short-term across the Service as a whole, there are inevitably longer-term and specific

consequences. In addition, the stresses fall disproportionately on the smaller forces and on smaller trade groups. This paper assesses whether, for these groups in particular, a line has been crossed, and urgent action is now imperative.

TRAINING

Training is not an end in itself, the Services train to meet certain standards so that they are best able to undertake the tasks assigned, and it is the responsibility of commanders, at all levels, to ensure that their personnel are confident and able to carry out the duties expected of them. In turn, it is the Government's responsibility to ensure that sufficient funding and resources are made available to meet the training and operational requirements.

Preparing personnel for a combat role, making them (CR), is probably the most demanding yet essential task within the training regimen. In addressing the issue of combat readiness one must consider availability of manpower, the appropriateness of training equipment and how much time is available. Whereas in the 'Cold War' combat readiness was the product of a continuous training schedule, dictated by NATO operational readiness criteria and tested by rigorous NATO Tactical Evaluation, today, who decides if a unit is CR, and then tests it - against what operational criteria? Is there time to exercise and train in appropriate exercise scenarios? Are there sufficient UK-based aircraft available to train adequately and, more importantly, do these aircraft have the right operational equipment to provide realistic pre-deployment training?

It has been suggested by several sources that in the case of RAF Air Transport (AT) deployments, and certain helicopter detachments that pre-deployment training is below the minimum standard that would have been expected in the past. The sources further suggest that special Defensive Aid Suites (DAS), night vision systems, and even body armour, are in such short supply that crews have little or no training in their use until deployed to the operational area. This lack of aircraft-specific DAS may also have led to AT over-flying an operational high-threat area with no DAS fitted. A significant source of stress to the crew and any observant passengers!

In the past pilots and aircraft crews could not deploy if not already certified CR, or at best Limited Combat Ready (LCR). In the latter case LCR crews were, as the title indicates, restricted in their operational

capabilities. Is this still the case? The evidence suggests it might not be. In one parliamentary answer the Secretary of State for Defence stated that:

“.. We specifically ensure that the forces deployed into the operational theatres are appropriately trained for their operations. **That may mean on some occasions that the training needs to take place partly here and partly in the operational theatre.** However, I do not accept that the forces being deployed are under-trained for what they are being asked to do“”.

Serving sources have reported that for RAF AT and helicopter crews this ‘partly’ in-theatre training may not be as rare as the Secretary of State implies. This begs many questions. What pressure is this in-theatre training having on operations? Moreover, coupled with regular combat exposure, what combat stress is this exerting on the crews being rotated through the operational areas? How do AT crews - who are based in UK and have to switch, sortie by sortie, from benign to belligerent areas of operations - manage to train for, what is, an ever changing task?

The effects are not, however, just confined to the overseas theatre and there are down-stream effects to be considered. The motto of the RAF Parachute Training School is “Knowledge Dispels Fear” but supporting that knowledge is an intense training and a familiarisation with the technical business that is parachuting. (An activity not without its own adrenalin inducing moments). However, RAF AT availability is now so restricted that large numbers of ‘Paras’ are unable to make qualifying jumps and RAF AT crews are in danger of losing the skills to drop them. This is just one example of a possible capability gap that is being opened up but others exist too. Ultra low level cargo drops, night vision capability, air to air refuelling and fighter evasion must be practised or the skills will be lost. Undoubtedly, given the high tempo of operations and lack of airframes, some of our AT and helicopter crews will train in some of these areas, but not all and not often enough.

However, in-theatre, the effects are more acute and more worrying. Field Marshal Montgomery is recognised as, arguably, the pre-eminent trainer of troops to emerge from WWII. He understood, from personal experience, the draining effects of combat even on seasoned troops. The Field Marshal fully appreciated that in modern warfare a well trained and rested force is better able to withstand the long term shock of battle. Consequently his attacks were always characterised by thorough and realistic pre-battle training exercises and fresh reserves of manpower to replace battle weary formations. If an airman is superbly trained, understands his role and has confidence in his equipment then his ability

to withstand combat stress will be bolstered. Conversely, fail to train him adequately and the opposite might well be true.

OVERSTRETCH

In a speech by our former Prime Minister, Mr Blair, much was made of the 'Military Covenant', but implicit in this covenant was a 16 month break between operational deployments (the Harmony Guidelines). This is not being achieved by many in the RAF, with inevitable consequences.

The smaller the trade or Force the greater the pressure to re-deploy without adequate time for rest and recuperation between operational tours. Add to this, the already acknowledged shortages in trained manpower and the consequences of this overstretch can be lethal. To take but one example reported by DASA; the number of PUMA accidents not due to enemy action, has been 22 in 36 years. Nine have occurred in the last 7 years but 4 occurred in 2007 alone. Although the Board of Inquiry reports for the 4 Puma lost in 2007 still have to be published, it has been reported that none of these were due to malfunction. If no enemy action or malfunction was the cause of several very expensive aircraft being seriously damaged or destroyed, with resultant death and injury, were the crews to blame? If so, why?

Politicians and their advisers know that without adequate time between operations individuals and formations will suffer from fatigue and a reduction in fighting effectiveness. The smaller the pool of trained personnel the more often they must rotate through the combat zone and the shorter the time available for essential pre-deployment training. Following a combat deployment unit strengths can be depleted through illness, casualties, courses and natural wastage. Filling these gaps requires time: time to induct replacements; and time to train the formations and units to CR status prior to the next deployment. The smaller and more specialised the Force the more acute the difficulty. Engineering, logistic, medical, catering and administrative trade groups as well as aircrew have all been pared back over the last 10 years, leaving fewer uniformed personnel to rotate through the operational areas. Fewer uniformed personnel means shorter periods of recuperation and a greater necessity to trade off leave and family time with the need to re-train, re-arm and prepare for the next operation.

It has been suggested that illness rates throughout the Services are the same today as they were 10 years ago. This may well be true. However, if

the rate were 10% ten years ago then 51,210 fit personnel would have been available for duty. Today, applying that same criterion 38,700 would be fit for duty. By April this year, if the Government has its way, only 36,900 will be fit for duty. Put another way, in 1997 the RAF had 56,900 personnel but by April 2008 the target is 41,000 yet 10 years ago we were neither in Afghanistan nor Iraq.

This is what 'overstretch' means. Too few airmen undertaking too many tasks with little or no time for structured recovery and training before re-deployment. The strain on morale is often camouflaged, short-term, in a 'can do' attitude, but there are always long-term consequences. Most clearly these are manifested in the form of higher exit rates, when trained manpower exercise their right to leave, creating still further gaps. But more perniciously, combat stress, and PTSD, are recognised to be on the increase, placing an ever increasing burden on the psychiatric services. According to Combat Stress – the Ex Services' Mental Health Society

“...although some of our patients are WW2 veterans, they have been followed by another generation of ex-Service men and women casualties. Veterans are aged between their twenties and their eighties. British forces have been in action throughout the world continuously since 1945 except for one year, and we are dealing with veterans from all these campaigns. It is seldom appreciated that the number of psychiatric casualties of war far exceeds those who are killed or physically disabled. We are also beginning to see a significant number suffering PTSD with experience of peacekeeping operations.”

Currently the Services' Mental Health Society is treating 8000 veterans. Yet this is only the tip of the iceberg and though most of those on successive operations say they are coping, how many cases go undiagnosed?

CONCLUSION

The change from a 'Cold War' posture to one of gearing-up for OOA operations, of an asymmetric nature, has been badly managed by The Government and MOD. With large reductions in manpower and aircraft the RAF is unable to provide sufficient recovery time and adequate training prior to re-deployment on successive operations. For the AT fleet, with its daily tasking in support of all operations, benign or otherwise, the problems are uniquely complex. The tempo of operations is even more

problematic for smaller units and formations whose limited pool of skilled manpower must turn around more frequently if operational continuity is to be achieved.

The Government has not given enough thought to the draining nature of recurring long-term operations on the 'posting plot' and the attendant stress this puts upon RAF personnel and equipment. Consequently we see a fracture in the 'Harmony Guidelines', lower retention rates, reduced training prior to operations and shortages of essential aircraft. This latter aspect being most worrying when the shortage leads to a lack of pre-deployment familiarization and the necessity for inexperienced personnel to learn, in-theatre, (in what is euphemistically described as On the Job Training -OJT)!

Finally, it must always be born in mind that, like training, the RAF AT and helicopter fleets are not an end in themselves. They are there to support operations; the army being most reliant upon tactical support in hostile environments. Any failure in the quality or quantity of this support can and does lead to battlefield casualties. Therefore, sufficient, appropriate and fully funded AT and helicopter support, flown and maintained by well trained and rested personnel, is not a luxury but a necessity.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Pressure must be brought on the Government to ensure sufficient funding is made available to increase the number of RAF personnel and aircraft, especially in the AT and helicopter fleets, to a figure that will enable operations to be conducted without infringing the 'Harmony Guidelines' or training requirements.

Pressure must be brought on the Government to ensure that suitable aircraft are available at the home base to enable appropriate, realistic and comprehensive training for all personnel prior to deployment.

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