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Part II: Social and institutional context and pressures on virtuous professional practice

Chapter 10: Character in the British Army: A precarious profession practice

Introduction

Finding balance between institutional or bureaucratic inclinations and professional ones is a challenge faced by all professions, but this is especially difficult for the military owing to its unique role and the unusual pressures that are placed upon armed forces personnel. The military profession is charged with the delivery of violence for the benefit of wider society and by morally appropriate means. It is unique among professions by virtue of the authorised use of abhorrent methods and the requirement for personnel to be prepared to die in the performance of their duties. Further underscoring the special conditions of the military profession is the supremacy of mission and group over individual interests, such that at times institutional imperatives can dominate. In these circumstances, the cultivation of appropriate professional military character is a complex endeavour, particularly when members of the profession must face some of the most challenging conditions imaginable. In this chapter, I shall focus on the British context to argue that though the British Army Officer Corps is a profession, it is a precarious one owing to ongoing tension between institutional and bureaucratic factors on the one hand, and a requirement that Army officers exercise professional and moral autonomy on the other. Also affecting the precariousness of the profession are traditional ethical dilemmas of war together with newer ones associated with modern forms of warfare. Ethical aspects of the profession are the main concern of the chapter, insofar as a defining feature of any profession is its ethic or code of ethics (Bayles 1988, Oakley and Cocking 2002, Wolfendale 2009).

The British Armed Forces – An Institution or Profession?

There are many good reasons for rejecting the possibility of military service as a professional practice. Indeed, it is no stretch of the imagination to define military contexts as ‘total institutions’ in the manner of Ervime Goffman who described army barracks and ships as places set apart from society and wherein separations ordinarily found - such as between home and work - are merged (1968: 16). In a total institution, an overall aim or mission blurs differences between individuals and creates different constraints on them to those outside of the institution; they are to be shaped and moulded

by collective goals. Although few agree that modern armed forces are entirely total institutions (Caforio 2006: 20), there are nevertheless times when the description is apt, such as during initial military training and operational tours. Under these circumstances, individual personnel will be subject to the power of a single authority and occupy separate spaces and places with context-specific rules, habits, and symbols. However, if the military cannot be considered a total institution overall, such totalising institutional tendencies might be acknowledged in other ways. In this regard, one might view the military as an institution wherein both professional and occupational roles are discernible, but where the dominant structural reality is an institutional one shaped by a loyalty to a central authority (Caforio 1988, Downes 1988). Under these conditions, there is a strong tendency towards over-emphasis on loyalty and obedience (..), to the extent that Huntington dubbed obedience the 'supreme military virtue' (Huntington 1964: 74). More directly and recently, Wolfendale (2009) found that military obedience hinders true professional integrity that may precisely require some departure from the dictates of authority if a moral good is at stake. Johnson (1974) also identifies typical institutional military habits, such as excessive compliance with authority; prioritisation of career advancement over ethical considerations; and valuing results and unit reputation above other concerns.

Such institutional military practices as those mentioned above belong to closed and insular work environments, and in military terms reinforce a contextually necessary selfless and single-minded commitment to the mission. This kind of analysis of military trends also highlights an often-celebrated difference from civilian society whereby military personnel might claim some superiority to civilians. While Huntington celebrates difference or divergence as a mark of professional military identity, such divergence can often bring conflict and cause offence. The exclusion of 363 men and women from the services between 1990 and 1995 for homosexuality (Strachan 2003), the lawful discharging of pregnant women until 1993 (Forster 2006) and instances of bullying, racism, and sexism (Forster 2006) are all cases in which military practices - justified in the name of uniqueness-of-role and operational effectiveness – were found unacceptable to wider society. More realistically, Janowitz (1960) argues for an evolving military service that keeps pace with changing society while retaining some differences - a balancing act that has, over the years, ushered in managerial and technical civilian working procedures involving less authoritative internal control and a shift away from exclusively heroic conceptions of military agency. This broadening of working practices beyond those of a traditional military kind is explained in the institutional / occupational thesis (Moskos 1976, Moskos and Wood 1988) that highlights the interplay in the armed forces of both institutional and occupational practices of work.

Another defining (institutional) feature of armed forces is a clear hierarchical structure of rank. This raises questions about how far professional status may be equally distributed across the ranks. Distinction of rank is primarily made between commissioned and non-commissioned officers and this classification is not readily conducive to the exacting criteria for general professional practice (cf Olsthoorn 2012). Hence, in the academic literature, non-commissioned officers are generally denied professional status (Caforio 1988), although the case for extending this to lower ranks is increasing as more junior ranks are facing uniquely challenging and unpredictable situations (Aronovitch 2001, Broesder, Buijs et al. 2014): to this extent, each often highly trained individual soldier, sailor, airmen and marine, adds more particular and peculiar value to collective effort than ever before (Shaw 2005: 37). In smaller professional forces, today's lower ranks no longer operate in large structures wherein individuals are readily interchangeable and/or replaceable. Rather, a high degree of personal professionalism and responsibility is required across the ranks, well exemplified by the concept of the 'tactical corporal', a term based on a junior marine who – isolated from command – has to make crucial judgements under changing and challenging conditions (Krulak 1997). Despite this, however, there are still strong reasons for denying professional status to non-commissioned officers. Thus, Huntingdon (1964: 220) separates *commissioned* officers for professional status by virtue of their management of violence by contrast with the application of violence by others. Similarly, and in relation to the US Army, Olson (2014) points out that enlisted soldiers do not plan their own missions, make war plans, are more technically oriented and do not take an oath of office. Moreover, the burden of required military obedience still falls most heavily on non-commissioned officers. It is for such reasons that the Army officer corps of the British Army is distinguished from other ranks as a profession – albeit a precarious one.

Defining the profession

Most definitions of professionalism concur that this comprehends at least the following requirements: a shared area of competence; initial and continuing education; a measure of independence of external authority; concern with a social need or public good and a professional code of ethics. More specific to the armed forces, Nuciari states military professionalism 'embodies a number of characteristics such as a theoretical and practical body of theory, a high degree of autonomy and control over the exercise of the activity, an ethic particular to the professional group and a sense of corporateness linking together the professional practitioners' (2006: 69). According to Huntington (1957), the military is a distinct profession wherein a unique role to deliver violence for 'socially approved purposes' (Caforio 2006: 16), gives the officer corps a certain autonomy defining a unique relationship with the state. Because of this relationship and the peculiar nature of their political role and function,

the officer corps is set apart in important ways from wider society. While military power resides in a distinct military profession this institution – at the same time – needs the ethical authority of the wider society it serves in order to prevent it becoming detached and out of touch with that society. A document defining British Army Values and Standards states that they are: ‘the authoritative yardstick that define how we behave and on which we judge and measure that behaviour’. Further, ‘(v)alues are the moral principles – the intangible character and spirit - that should guide and develop us into the sort of people we should be’ (Army 2008). Six particular values or virtues are emphasised and these are: courage, discipline, respect for others, integrity, loyalty and selfless commitment. According to the same document, these military values have a special moral and functional significance in a military context. More recently, these values have been given high profile in an Army leadership code (MOD 2017) that, according to official sources, is:

..... founded on our Values. To us, Courage, Discipline, Respect for Others, Integrity, Loyalty and Selfless Commitment are much more than words on a page, they are what the British Army stands for, and what sets us apart from society. And society has the greatest respect for what our forebears and we have done. We apply our Values to what we do using our Standards of Appropriate, Lawful and Totally Professional behaviour. The Army’s Values are part of good leaders, who live them 24/7/365, whatever the situation.

Of course, for the British Army officer, good character and sound ethical judgement are personal requirements, but they are also features needed for professional stability and to protect professional practices from both internal and external threats. Until we can discover better ways for achieving military aims and objectives, the British Army will continue to cherish time-honoured soldierly qualities of loyalty, teamwork and comradeship that depend on collective identities within a military institution and community that is significantly isolated from wider society and prone to some institutional bias. However, these militarily valued features have both professional strengths and weaknesses. While army ‘Values and Standards’ and the new Army Leadership Guide identify the principal values and virtues to be cultivated for exemplary military service they provide less guidance about how to proceed when values conflict or when local military norms or prescriptions are at odds with what is more generally morally right. These, for all personnel, are likely to be questions of context-dependent judgement, but especially for professional Army officers. Unfortunately, as already briefly mentioned, internal institutional and professional factors are not all that complicate or impede such judgements, since a new era of modern warfare has ushered in additional ethical quandaries. However, before turning to these, some discussion of character in the Army profession may be in order.

Character in the Army profession

It is a well-known paradox that the brutality of war needs to be tempered with charity, compassion and respect (cf Biggar 2013) and that good soldiers should nevertheless be good people (Aronovitch 2001, Olson 2014). Thus, while moral character for Army officers is cultivated primarily for the conduct of special military roles, it ought not to be reduced to these. A more moral aspirational approach 'emphasizes that personal and professional ethical conduct are intimately related and (...) promoting ethical conduct is not merely a means to achieving military efficacy, but (is) an end in its own right' (Olson 2014: 19). Societies have a responsibility to the soldiers and officers they send into conflicts (see the Military Covenant), not least because moral injury can occur when military personnel cannot reconcile their activities and actions with a legitimate moral purpose or with the actions of a morally good person (Sherman 2005). Of course, some safeguard comes firstly from not having to harm others at all since, this can affect soldiers retrospectively and threaten their long-term well-being. However, a second safeguard is for individual soldiers and officers - forced to visit harm on others in the course of their duties - to be relatively sure that when force is necessary, it is unavoidable and warranted within terms of existing laws. In this regard, ethical codes and good character development may serve to insulate soldiers from the worst psychological and moral effects of military service and prevent 'the warrior from becoming a monster in his or her own eyes' (French 2005:10). If possible, this should extend to a warrior's wider life – a long-term perspective that needs to be built into all military concerns with character formation. As French (2005:10) notes:

Warriors are not mere tools; they are complex, sentient beings with fear, loves, hopes, dreams, talents, and ambitions (.....) those who send them off to war must make an effort to ensure that the warriors themselves fully understand the purpose of, and need for, their sacrifice Finally, the state must show concern for what will happen to its warriors after battles are won (or lost). The dead should be given decent burials (if it is possible) and appropriate memorials. Those wounded in body should be given the best medical care, and treatment should be made available for those with psychological wounds. Former warriors must be welcomed back into communities that spawned them and sent them away to do what needed to be done. If these conditions are met, even those warriors who lose their lives for the cause were not mere means to an end.

Attending to the 'whole' military person and caring about moral character beyond military function would therefore seem to be key ethical concerns of military professionalism. Unfortunately, this is not always achieved or prioritised (Sherman 2005). The poor after-care of US Vietnam veterans, for example, demonstrates how a conflict – especially one with moral legitimacy problems – may lead to

serious neglect of the proper social rehabilitation of ex-service personnel. Moreover, many Vietnam veterans suffered not only post-war physical disability and psychological trauma, but also by association with a morally dubious international conflict in which many serious war crimes were actually committed. Unfortunately, the requirement to cultivate good moral character beyond bouts of military role and service can be lost sight of while mission concerns dominate. In this regard, the late US General Taylor pointed out that a good soldier or officer can be a bad man to the extent that they actually excel at key military tasks (Robinson 2007). Worse still, however, the idea that unsavoury people might actually be needed to execute the nasty business of war courts a functional argument that would relativise ethical standards to operational performance. From a functional perspective, ethical standards are relatively unimportant unless they may be connected to a clear military need (cf. French 2005). This is not a view that is compatible with professional military practices and it is an attitude to ethical standards that is likely to be particularly problematic in the context of modern warfare as will become clear in the next section.

A new era of modern warfare

Much has changed for armed forces over the past 100 years or so. Much of such change in the UK has been driven by responses to external national threats, with direct implications for the British military profession and for the character formation of its personnel. During World Wars I and II, National Service drew vast numbers of civilians into the ranks of military such that it was said 'whole societies were at war' (Dandeker 1990 101). During and after these conflicts, serving in the armed forces was written into general citizenship and conscription involved belonging to a large bureaucratic system wherein many were reluctant participants who lacked any professional military sensibility or skill. This was characteristic of the modern era - a period from 1900 to 1945 during which the most significant military role was that of 'combat leader' whose job it was to defend the homeland. Since 1973, however, UK forces have been entirely voluntary and such military personnel have lately been involved in a wider diversity of roles (cf Hajjar 2014). Today's British Army, for example, has now a long modern record of operations in such diverse theatres of conflict as Bosnia, Afghanistan and Iraq. However, these engagements have been blighted by numerous fatalities and psychological as well as physical casualties on all sides, as well as by controversies of moral legitimacy (as in the decision to invade Iraq). Moreover, the true cost of these engagements on individual service personnel is probably only now being appreciated.

Looking ahead, pressing challenges for the UK armed forces involve coping with employment reductions (the size of the British Army as of 1st Jan 2017 was only 83,260) and uncertainty about future roles as the 2015 Strategic Defence and Security Review is executed. The role of the modern

soldier is diverse and complex, involving tasks that vary from armed combat to providing humanitarian relief and aid. A new era of war has placed new and unprecedented burdens on armed forces, and while some writers deny that warfare has changed fundamentally in modern times (cf. Shaw 2005: 33), a more common view is that conflict differs quite radically from anything that has gone before. New wars are more likely to involve unequally matched combatants of some moral difference or diversity with regard to accepted 'rules' of war. New conflicts may occur between state and non-state combatants whereby the latter may be large civilian populations – and therefore not regular or legitimate military personnel – or little more than terrorists fighting for personal interests and causes (Fisher 2011). Technological changes in means of warfare are also important. The so-called 'revolution in military affairs' has introduced such innovations as precision bombing and generally advanced communication and intelligence systems. New wars are more likely than before to involve the civilian populations of towns and cities (Smith 2007: 719), involving serious blurring of distinctions between combatants and civilians with disproportionate risks to the latter (Shaw 2005). Dutch former General de Vries (2013: 201) points out that all of this increases moral pressure on modern military personnel and the widespread need to negotiate increasingly morally ambiguous situations:

'(N)ew' wars require more moral strengths from soldiers than 'old' wars did. First of all, the challenges to morality have grown and changed. The 'new' wars are fought mostly on the level of small units which means that junior soldier (other ranks, non-commissioned officer's and officers) have to bear the brunt of moral decision-making. Furthermore, these small units operate in relative isolation, as generally speaking there is only a limited number of troops in an extended area of operations. Often there is no direct support from the higher echelons available, both material as well as moral. The unpredictability of armed confrontations and the variety in intensity adds to the pressure on small units and their soldiers. Also the moral complexity of 'new' wars has increased: the opposing fighters are mostly in civilian attire which makes it hard to distinguish them from peaceable civilians and they can also ignore the rule of international law. In short, in 'new' wars soldiers face far more morally complex situations than in 'old' wars

Over many centuries, the 'rules of war' have changed and developed (Walzer 1977, Sherman 2005: 173) and, since Aquinas in the 13th Century, governments and armed forces have been concerned with two key concerns of 'Just War Theory': first, that war *should* be (as far as possible) just; second, that if just, it should be conducted well. 'Jus ad bellum' is the principle that war is justified or permissible if and only if:

it is authorized by a competent authority;

it is for a just cause;
it is with right intention;
it is a last resort;
any harm likely to be caused is not disproportionate to or in excess of any good achieved.

However, 'jus in bello' requires that war be conducted so that:

harm likely to occur from military action is not disproportionate to the good to be achieved by that action;
non-combatants should not be deliberately involved, harmed or threatened

Meeting these conditions is vital for a professional military practice to operate in the interests of a larger international moral and public good. The delivery of 'necessary' violence in defence of more civilised values has to be judiciously managed and legitimised by sound moral reason and principles, insofar as actions taken without this warrant may be harmful or criminal. This applies to military action at all levels – of state, military institution and individual combatant - though it is also thereby becoming harder to justify the moral legitimacy of any war. In this regard, ethical rules and guidance for war have not kept pace with radical changes referred to earlier, and for Shaw (2005) western approaches to and perspectives on war seem to be in crisis. It is argued, for example, that Just War Theory is inadequate for dealing with certain kinds of modern conflict, such as asymmetric warfare (Rodin 2006), terrorism (Margolis 2004) and the use of such new technologies as unmanned weapons systems (Killmister 2008, Wolfendale 2012). Still, for individual military personnel it is probably the Law of Armed Conflict that is more practically relevant, insofar as it is intended to strike a decent balance between general respect for humanity and military necessity in the light of military experience. This law relates to Just War Theory and is also known as International Humanitarian Law. The Army expects soldiers to take this law seriously and apply it at all times. It covers five main principles: that soldiers *distinguish* between combatants and civilians; that force is *proportional*; that under the condition of *military necessity* the only legitimate objective is to weaken enemy forces; *methods and means* of war are not unlimited; there should be *good faith* between opponents and all people should be treated *humanely and without discrimination* (ICRC 2002). Formal rules and codes of war such as the Law of Armed Conflict and Just War Theory provide senior military leaders with guidance in military decisions, but they also offer guidance to ordinary service people who 'may be faced in war with decisions of far greater moment than they would have encountered in civilian life' (Fisher 2011: 84).

In all imaginable conditions, the British Army's regimental system is designed to bond comrades in small fighting units, and these are regarded as prime military motivators (Shils and Janowitz 1975, Woodward 2007). Attachment and loyalty between comrades, despite notable exceptions (King 2006), are usually commended for fighting spirit, raising morale and promoting some sense of security. For Gray (1970 (1959):39), comradeship is generally a requirement of units being forced together in the face of a shared aim or danger which calls for unit members to look out for one another. That comradeship motivates has been well illustrated in much literature and poetry of war (cf. French 2005, Biggar 2013); it encourages loyalty and even obedience as indicated earlier. In this regard, an appropriate balance of comradeship might be to the Army what caring is to nursing. However, army Officers (as well as individual soldiers) need to have regard to wider concerns of overall military purpose and legitimacy and despite their centrality to the military way of life, loyalty and comradeship are attachments of a more social and institutional than professional nature. Such virtues or values of armed service need to be balanced with other virtues if they are to find a proper moral place in professional military life. As for all virtues, there are times when there might be an excess of comradeship, which is just as problematic for the military community as a deficiency of this virtue. For example, excesses of comradeship might involve overly close relationships between certain soldiers to the exclusion of others and these relationships could on occasions dominate other important considerations in ways detrimental to operational effectiveness, fairness and teamwork. Indeed, the need for comradeship in the military context – especially at the very beginning of their careers – is highlighted by ex-British colonel, Tim Collins (2015) in his description of intensive initial officer training at Sandhurst:

So how do you cope? Well, you can't. That's the point. Only by dividing the work between teams can it ever be done. A team does the wash, a team irons – and everybody keeps everybody awake in lectures. In the field a team makes the tea and cooks the scoff while others put up the shelters. If anybody is unlucky enough to be summoned to Barossa in the evening with their bed and locker to be presented immaculately, then it takes a whole section of eight to get the beds, locker gear and victim there on time and acceptably dressed.

(Collins 2015)

Unfortunately, the risk of moral lapse or corruption is no less great in military service than in other spheres of life (French 2005) but, with the military, this may be as much a consequence of the harsh conditions of modern combat as it is of institutional constraints. One serious hazard for professional military service is a liability to individual and/or collective moral lapse that under some institutional pressures can have far-reaching consequences – and, regretfully, there is no shortage of recent global

examples of such moral failure. For example, in Somalia in 1993, a Canadian Airborne Regiment used excessive force, including the baiting and killing of thieves and the beating to death of a prisoner in military custody (Kasurak 2011). Again, at Abu Ghraib prison (2004), U.S. troops used systematic torture and were significantly branded by Pentagon officials as ‘the six guys who lost us the war’ (Streatfield 2007: 378). Closer to home, and no less dishonorable, is the case of Baha Mousa, an Iraqi hotel worker whose mistreatment by members of the British Queens Lancashire Regiment led to his subsequent death. An oversupply of (institutional) loyalty prevented these British soldiers (and officers) from resisting any independent moral response. The case of Baha Mousa illustrates the negative and destructive side of loyalty and comradeship for good military service. Loyalty can undermine independent moral conscience (Arendt 1968, Verweij 2007), privilege obedience (French 2005, Wolfendale 2009, Olson 2014) and/or reinforce patriarchy (Derrida 1994) – and loyalty has even been dubbed an evil by O’Brien (2003). An excess of loyalty is a perennial hazard for military personnel, leading to ‘group-think’ and the undermining of independent moral and professional thought and action.

Conclusion

This chapter defends the British Army officer corps as a professional practice according to much the same moral standards and principles of other professional practices, while cautioning that the military differs from other professions in a number of significant respects – related, most notably to a special relationship with the state and its involvement in fairly singular dangerous roles and practices. To this extent, the army may be regarded as professionally ‘precarious’ insofar as it requires continual vigilance to resist certain institutionally problematic internal tendencies. All the same, in an appropriately ‘managed’ form, such institutional features are nevertheless significant for effective military practice and therefore fundamental to its success in the singular and straitened circumstances foreign to other professional practices. The ethical dimensions of military service have dominated the present discussion insofar as these are central to any and all conceptions of professionalism, but perhaps all the more so in the case of a professionally ‘precarious’ occupation such as military. Typically, soldiers will experience situations where there is particularly pressing risk of moral lapse. The circumstances of war can sometimes demand more than individual virtue and character can withstand (Flanagan 1991, Ross and Nisbett 1991, Tripodi 2012). Indeed, this may reflect what moral theorists call the fundamental attribution error (Ross and Nisbett 1991), which is described by Flanagan as: ‘an inclination to overestimate the impact of dispositional factors (individual traits) and underestimate situational ones’ (Flanagan 1991: 306). Moreover, while teamwork, loyalty and comradeship may maximise military courage in the face of extreme danger they also carry their own

hazards. In this regard, individual soldiers and officers need educating with regard to their character deficits (Tripodi 2012) and to learn that while they cannot succeed without collective effort (Robinson 2007, Sandin 2007), they also require the personal moral character to resist the group where and when morally necessary. Professional army personnel therefore require personal qualities of moral character as a counterweight to collegial and institutional constraints and pressures. Indeed Professor Don Snider Vietnam veteran and life-time apologist of US military, warns in his book on the 'Future of the Army Profession' (2005), that the Army cannot be considered professional merely because it claims to be so and proceeds to note that institutional and bureaucracy threats to its professional status are particularly potent during times of military force contraction such as in the 1990s and at present.

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