

Letter to the Editor

Sir,

Apropos the *Journal of Defence Studies* (Vol. 7, No. 2, April-June 2013) on the theme of 'Ethics and Morals in the Armed Forces', I submit the following general comments and ideas.

My overall impression is that the Army has been unduly harsh and self-deprecatory regarding the present state of its moral health. As against this, the Army's track record has been excellent through all wars and operations since independence, except in 1962. In addition, the Army has done sterling work in quelling or containing various insurgencies in Nagaland, Punjab and, above all, the virulent, decades old insurgency in Kashmir, which is still raging intensely. In spite of the most strenuous efforts made by Pakistan, Kashmir still remains under Indian control.

The services set very high standards for themselves and have a system of on-going, self-appraisal at all times. While it is a commendable effort, it should also be a realistic and healthy introspection. Further, it should be an in-service exercise and not an open-ended discussion in a magazine, as it is often quoted out of context by vested interests, by media or political factions.

The fact of the matter is that, today, the Indian Armed Forces are among the best in the world. Indeed, they may well be described as an island of the ideals of Duty, Honour and Country, amidst a sea of societal venality and self-service.

However, the recent adverse publicity about the services in the media has triggered a sense of disquiet in the services and public alike about the perceived negative trends. One of the previous chiefs lost his equilibrium and went viral on a petty personal issue, leading to a lot of muck-raking amongst the high brass. Recently, another service chief has been cited for wrongdoing for personal gain. The situation has been

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further exacerbated by cases of fratricide and suicide in the Army, which have been sensationalized by the media. All this has done incalculable harm to both the self-esteem and the image of the services, which have also lost ground vis-à-vis the bureaucrats and the media. So, instead of fevered soul-searching and broadcasting of our so-called weaknesses, the first requirement is to stabilize the situation and reinstate the morale and self-confidence of the officers and men.

Is there a problem, and how serious is it? Or are there multiple problems the services grapple with? I have put down some of my thoughts on the issue below.

Corruption

It is a national scourge. The self-discipline of the services has largely insulated them against this evil, but it has reared its ugly head from time to time. The regiments and battalions of the fighting arms are largely unaffected because of their esprit de corps, continuity of officers and men, and personal example and direct supervision by commanding officers and brigade commanders. There is also little or no opportunity and contact with vendors or civilian agents. At this stage, the transgressions are mostly of the nature of misuse of privileges, such as the use of transport, misuse of regimental funds on unduly exuberant celebrations on Raising Day, Battle Honours Day, and the like. This is a function of better command and control and ongoing oversight by formation commanders.

The main problem arises in smaller/independent, and often scattered, units of the logistic services where there is no continuity of officers and men (hence no buddy-bonding) and opportunities galore due to frequent contact with civilians and vendors. Here, the answer lies in more frequent visits by seniors, guidance and moral counselling, systemic checking, vigilance, and, of course, a system of exemplary punishments. We may investigate ways and means to introduce the regimental system in the services to the extent possible or a system of affiliation to larger field units or formations, but ultimately the answer lies in better policing.

The corruption in the senior ranks, generals and equivalents, is of a different and more serious nature. This is also a comparatively recent phenomenon, especially spotlighted by the recent squabbles in higher ranks. It needs to be analysed and, if true, addressed on priority. Why should officers with long years of meritorious service succumb to temptation or pressure in the fag end of an outstanding service? Is it the spectre of looming retirement when domestic pressures are peaking—

most retire between the ages of 50-60, when they still have years of vim and vigour but are unemployable in the industry, etc. There is no system of lateral placement in public sector units (PSUs) or other sinecures such as tribunals, special committees, ambassadorial or gubernatorial assignments, and so on, unlike those available for bureaucrats. So highly decorated and highly regarded officers face the unwelcome prospects of going home on pension. The recent upward revision of pension scales has given some relief, but it is still not enough for a life of dignity and comfort. Often, there is need to buy a house and have whole time house help, besides a car and a driver, so essential when one becomes old and feeble.

It is also pertinent to mention the factor of frustration and poor job satisfaction because in the senior ranks, officers feel the weight of subservience to civil bureaucrats who have gained ascendance as a primary service and have set themselves up as 'interlocutors' between the military and the political leaders. Officers, who have risen to the position of Chiefs or Army Commanders represent enormous experience and ability, so they resent being treated as mere ceremonial figureheads and denied a role in deliberations and formulation of national strategy at the highest level. The services fully subscribe to the concept of supremacy of political authority which they contend is not synonymous with supremacy of the bureaucracy. Hence, they find it hard to accept a system of 'through me' established by bureaucrats by playing on the politicians' fears of a military take-over, despite faultless and unquestioning disciplined service for over six decades since Independence. So it is time this ghost was laid to rest once and for all.

This mistrust is unfortunate because it has led to an imbalanced and lopsided system of decision-making and policy formulation. The lacunae are all the more serious because our political leadership has little military experience, not to mention the fact that we share contiguous borders with two powerful and hostile neighbours. This state of affairs impinges on the morale of senior military officers and overall health of the military: this is because, besides being highly nationalistic, they know that they will be left carrying the can when things go wrong, as it happened in 1962, or, more recently, the frequent incidence of ugly incidents on the LOC, which is often perceived to be due to a soft foreign policy.

Sycophancy

This is a bane of eastern societies with a history of foreign rule. We are also a polite people and respectful towards elders and people in authority.

However, the armed forces have nurtured a culture of dignity of the individual and a hierarchical structure of ranks. The main problem in the military is that there are too many persons chasing too few appointments. The pyramidal and narrowing-funnel nature of the military system is such that 'you either go up or go out'. Consequently, there is intense competition for favourable reports. It is a command function to discourage such traits. A good leader will inculcate the spirit of self-respect and self-confidence in his subordinates. He will also build up a reputation of fairness and impartiality on his part. Thus, he will engender similar qualities among his officers by personal example.

It is also a function of proper cadre management to foresee and obviate logjams in various ranks. A recent example is the sanction of a large number of appointments in senior ranks. An excellent initiative by itself, but its implementation was not properly thought out. Even more important is a system of lateral employment in other governmental and quasi-governmental slots. There is a plethora of paramilitary organizations such as the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF), Special Frontier Force (SFF), Indo-Tibet Border Police (ITBP), Central Industrial Security Force (CISF), Border Security Force (BSF), and so on, which would also gain immensely by periodical infusion of trained officers and men. These could possibly be constituted as affiliates and adjuncts of the main military at the outset. Such lateral infusion should also be considered for PSUs. Retired officers and men are a reservoir of tremendous talent and experience, which is not being exploited by the nation to its full potential.

It is felt that the military offers only half a career to officers and men who labour long and intensively under most adverse conditions, away from their families; and then have to fend for themselves as civilians fairly early in life—the bulk of officers retire around 50 years of age. In fact, this is a major disincentive as well as a major reason for officer shortage, particularly in the fighting arms. At another level, the services also lose a lot of good officers who opt to go out soon after completing the minimum pensionable service. Another important area is the care and assistance to both serving and retired military personnel in the towns and villages, like the 'old times' when they had a lot of prestige. They deserve the help and attention of society, local politicians and the civil administration. The United States has one of the best system of Veterans Affairs (VA), with vast endowment and governmental funds, and extensive assistance for welfare of Vas, including dedicated VA hospitals all over the country.

Hence, it is not just a question of lapsed morals which, of course,

must be addressed, but also that of practical considerations as to how we can structure a worthwhile service package, both for men and officers if we want to have good leaders and good soldiers for the armed forces.

One of the articles in the special issue suggests a complex system of '360 degree' reporting and evaluation. However, the present system of Annual Confidential Reports (ACRs) and selection boards has stood the test of time. Besides, more wide-spread multiple reporting will only engender more sycophancy.

Officer-Man Relations

Much has been written on this aspect, mainly by nostalgic retired officers, the general purport being that it is not what it used to be. In support are quoted the incidents of fratricide in the Army, which is an euphemism for mutinous behaviour. Regrettably, the incidents have occurred in units of fighting arms, which makes it all the more alarming. As a matter of fact, these are clear cases of failure of command and need to be treated as such. There are rules and traditions to stamp out collective disobedience with exemplary punishment of officers and men alike, generally resulting in disbandment of the unit concerned, trial of men and officers, with numbers being sent home.

A healthy officer-man relationship and effective leadership is the bedrock of battle worthiness of the armed forces. The main function of the military is to fight wars, to kill or be killed, and that calls for a strong bond or a covenant of mutual trust between the leader and the led. Hence, regardless of whether it is a trend or aberrant cases, the remedy is the same, namely, strengthening of leadership and greater vigilance and emphasis by higher commanders.

There are several causative factors: long periods of counter-insurgency operations (particularly stressful and distasteful experience in itself); prolonged field service conditions without rest; lack of family life for extended periods; and the shortage of officers in units of fighting arms. Interaction and bonding between officers and men takes place during training sessions, on the sports field, and on social occasions, which is affected if the few officers available are continually busy on sundry duties like courts of enquiry, preparing presentations, brigade duties, and so on.

The commanding officer is the linchpin of the system, for a good commanding officer trains and makes good officers in his own image, and between them they make a good unit and good units are the sinews and lifeblood of a service. Hence, the nation should strive to make life in

the services an honorable and rewarding career so as to attract the best material. As it is, most young men fresh out of college aspire to a career in the civil services, police or industry because that's where the power and money lies. The call to Duty, Honour and Country is faint and it is getting fainter.

Role of Media

Perhaps the only force which can balance out the draw of power and lucre is the call to fame and glory and fervent patriotism. This magic wand is in the hands of the media which can make ordinary men achieve extraordinary things. The power of electronic and TV media today is amazing. But it has both positive and negative aspects and can make or mar public images or reputations. Instant TV images can be flashed around the world in seconds. The armed forces must learn to interact with them and be granted powers to do so directly, which is so essential in the fast moving situations where the 'First-Word-In' makes all the difference. It will also profit the armed forces to cultivate contacts and take the trouble to educate the media in service matters and to counsel against the temptation to sensationalism. In particular, the media should be trained in dealing with the armed forces with sensitivity. The media wields great power, for generating sympathy and praise for the good work being done by the military under most trying conditions as also for mobilizing public opinion in favor of the veterans in the society.

Suggestions

Most of the articles in the special issue have gone to great lengths on the polemics and etymology of terms such as ethics, norms, customs, and so on. To my mind, it would have been more useful to address specific issues in a methodical manner, that is, causes and practical remedies. Incidentally, we do not have an article from a serving commanding officer or a serving brigade commander. They are the principal actors and stakeholders, so their perceptions would have been most useful. I commanded my battalion (5/8 GR) in action in 1965 war in the Chhamb-Jaurian Sector. I visited them again last year after a lapse of many years. I was very happy to find the unit in good heart and with excellent rapport between officers and men.

It stands out, again and again, that the quality of a military is determined by the quality of the officer. If we have that irreplaceable individual, most other problems become easier to solve. So, there is need

for a special commission to go thoroughly into the conditions of service, pattern of employment, and questions of a full career, and so on, with a view to attract the best. The services have long been asking for a dedicated Pay Commission, and alternately, a proper service representation in the commission constituted. The fact of the matter is that the profession of arms has lost its sheen, the old prestige associated with it is no longer there, and the soldier and the officer gets little importance or recognition in society. Scales of pay and pension have improved but pecuniary benefits, though important, are not the whole story because recognition and prestige is even more important for the profession of arms, which is a life of hardship and danger. The British understood the power of ego and prestige, and instituted a system of honorifics and titles for the military. Even now almost all senior generals of the British Army are conferred knighthoods or higher awards on retirement. The erstwhile British Army of India had awards like, Indian Medal, Indian Order of Merit, Good Conduct and Long Service Medal, and so on. In comparison, our system of awards is extremely niggardly, and awards such as Padma Bhushan or Vibushan are rarely given to senior officers on retirement.

In the final analyses, the country gets the kind of military that it deserves. So it is in our national interests to create the right conditions to attract young men and women of high calibre and lofty ideals, and then give them the requisite support and authority so that the military is able to fulfill its role in the security and glory of the nation.

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