CHAPTER 2

THE NATURE OF COMMAND

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1. INTRODUCTION

When I was asked about a year ago if I would be interested in participating in this workshop, I jumped at the chance, because I feel that command is such a very fundamental issue in the profession of arms. I, for one, feel that the human element and human presence will always play a very significant role on the battlefield and will have a direct influence on the outcome of future conflict in war and in operations short of war. Humans will always play the most significant role in war and in combat.

In 1966, a young infantry lieutenant was wrapping up a week-long period of training at Camp Sarcee in Alberta, Canada, with a 10-mile (16 km) route march with his platoon of about 30 soldiers. The fact that he had not seen the company commander all week created a somewhat conflicting feeling. But on balance, the young lieutenant was disappointed, because he was proud of his accomplishments and there had been times throughout the week when he would have appreciated some guidance. The company commander, with the sergeant-major, did show up in his jeep at about the 6-mile (10 km) point; without getting out of the vehicle, he complained loudly and angrily that the pace was too slow. Both had obviously been drinking.

This young lieutenant later (in 1983) found himself serving as the commanding officer (CO) of an infantry battalion in Wainwright, Alberta. Three weeks into a seven-week concentration, he had seen the brigade commander once—in the officers' mess in camp. When the CO had been beckoned to a meeting with the brigade commander to discuss, of all things, the suspension of one of his soldiers from the upcoming hockey league, not a word had been mentioned about tactics or doctrine or tempo or training. The only real appearance of the brigade commander occurred

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during the final live-fire battle group exercise—when he hovered high overhead in his helicopter. Following the gut-slugging three-hour assault, the troops were gathered for a debrief. The lieutenant-colonel and the subunit commanders made a few points regarding tactics, battle procedure, coordination, and so on, and congratulated the troops on a job very well done. When the brigade commander was asked to comment, his only utterance was a question that he posed rhetorically to the 300 or 400 gathered soldiers: Why did you attack into the sun? The young CO very simply and quickly explained that the tactical situation dictated that the attack be conducted from west to east. The officers and noncommissioned officers shuddered when the brigade commander nervously asked—again rhetorically—whether they had ever read about the Japanese pilots’ cardinal rule, about never attacking into the sun. Then he hopped into his helicopter and headed back to the officers’ mess.

I was that young lieutenant, and later that CO. And I recount these two incidents because for me they illustrate examples of poor command. Not just a lack of leadership, not just a lack of presence, not just a lack of influence, but indeed a dereliction in duty by commanders who should have known better—or perhaps did, but chose not to execute their responsibilities. In both cases, they had established and enunciated the objectives that were to be achieved; yet both, in my view, failed miserably at doing so. In these examples, command was not executed. There were no examples exerted of what I will later describe to be the essence of command.

2. THE MEANING OF COMMAND

We have all, no doubt, wrestled with the real meaning of command and its inevitable comparison with and differentiation from leadership, management, authority, responsibility, and accountability. The Concise Oxford Dictionary provides several definitions for command—among them the following: as a verb, “give command to or order” and “have authority over or control of”; and as a noun, “the exercise or tenure of authority, [especially] ... military.” The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) definition of command (the noun) is “authority vested in an individual . . . for the direction, coordination and control of military forces” (NATO, 1988). NATO also defines command as an order given by a commander.

One cannot argue with the theme of authority when speaking of command. Indeed, command, in Canadian terms, is derived from the National Defence Act. Without legal and constitutional backing, commands that are issued—especially those dealing in terms of human lives—would be weak and totally ineffective at best. Command does entail the authority to issue orders and, in the ultimate sense, the authority to place soldiers in harm’s way—in essence, ordering them to put their lives on the line. In a military context, then, command would take on an extremely onerous tone if it were simply related to authority. It is this ultimate sacrifice and the fact that we are dealing in terms of human lives that separate military command from civilian command or authority.

We are all too well aware from recent events in our Canadian military—although not in the context of the ultimate sacrifice—of the very direct relationship