PUT AWAY THAT CALCULATOR AND PICK UP A BOOK!

by Charles Oliviero

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“RMC makes engineers literate
and artsmen numerate.”

– Rear-Admiral David Morse
Commandant, RMC
2000–2002

Amen to Admiral Morse. He had it right. Engineers need to be literate and not just ‘calculator-toting number crunchers.’ Artsmen need to understand basic maths and sciences. But, recently, another general officer in the air force bemoaned the fact that the Royal Military College of Canada (RMC) was not pushing enough science, engineering and math at its cadets. Officers, according to this misguided gentleman, needed more engineering and less time spent studying arts. “The Armed Forces needs engineers” was his message, and RMC is wasting too many resources on arts programs. I beg to differ.

The world does not work like a clock nor like a computer. Real life does not follow well-laid-out plans. There is no mechanical, deterministic design that everyone follows. Life is not based on some blueprint. As Canadian-born author Margaret Millar wrote: “Life is what happens while you’re making plans.” The ruling law of nature is chaos, not order. From Thucydides to Clausewitz to Heisenberg, thinkers and philosophers have been telling us that human progression is non-linear. Yet, the march towards linearly continues. At our universities, and, most troubling for the military, at RMC, engineering continues to be more important than philosophy. The proof of this is simple: RMC is the only university in Ontario where you cannot study philosophy.

At RMC, mathematics is an academic prerequisite. Philosophy is not offered at all. This denies the reality of the human condition. More importantly, for Canadian Forces (CF) officers to be pushed in this direction is not to arm them for their future duties; it is to disarm them. Officers are leaders. They are decision-makers. They are role models. But machines do not need to be led. Computers need no decision-makers. Fleets of vehicles do not look to role models for their performance parameters. But soldiers, sailors and aircrew do. Every moment of every day leaders are under constant, if benign, scrutiny. They need not only to lead well; they need to live their lives in an exemplary way.

How has this basic notion, that officers lead other human beings, been overlooked? It has been a long process, and one that has been hard-fought by the scientists over the humanists. Since the writings of Galileo and Newton and the subsequent Scientific Revolution, western society has become increasingly enamoured of science. This is not a bad thing. Our lives are made continuously better by advances in mathematics, physics, medicine et al. But science must not become the altar at which a whole society should worship. This is especially true for officers of the armed forces. Military officers must not lose sight of the fact that their primary, some might say only, function is to lead their subordinates. Machines and the science that makes them possible are important, but these machines should not hold a place of primacy. Science must retake its back seat in officer education.

I have always felt a certain empathy with those poor Pacific salmon that have to swim upstream against such overwhelming adversity. So few make it from ocean to spawning ground. Any logical analysis of their situation cannot hold a place of primacy. Science must not become the altar at which a whole society should worship. This is especially true for officers of the armed forces. Military officers must not lose sight of the fact that their primary, some might say only, function is to lead their subordinates. Machines and the science that makes them possible are important, but these machines should not hold a place of primacy. Science must retake its back seat in officer education.
An instructional scenario in the US Army’s Command and General Staff Officers Course at Fort Leavenworth describes a situation relevant to current military operations other than war. Soldiers deployed on a humanitarian support mission in an undeveloped nation confront drought, refugees, and a regional incidence of HIV estimated...
as being as high as 50 per cent. Accordingly, the senior tactical commander orders his soldiers to have only minimal contact with the local population, and no contact with wounded civilians. One soldier eventually disobeys. His upbringing and army training did not prepare him for what he is witnessing. He becomes so upset at seeing badly wounded orphans along the road during his daily supply distribution runs that he stops his truck and provides minor medical care to some of the injured children. His platoon commander immediately arrests him.

What should happen to that soldier?

First, was the tactical commander’s order lawful? Yes, for it was undoubtedly intended for force protection, not to increase human suffering. Was the soldier’s action legally correct? No. It violated the commander’s lawful order. Were the soldier’s actions morally correct? Arguably, both yes and no. The soldier was doing what was necessary to prevent unnecessary suffering to a helpless non-combatant child, and yet he violated his sworn obligation to “obey the (lawful) orders of the President and the officers appointed over him.”

So what about the soldier? Should he be punished? Should the commander reconsider his order? What effect will whatever happens have on the morale of the other soldiers in the unit? Knowing how to resolve calculus equations are useful and important, but will not help this soldier or his leaders. Having read Plato, Descartes or Kant, however, might offer some insight.

Lieutenant Colonel (ret’d) Charles Oliviero successfully completed a year of engineering at RMC before he saw the light and re-educated himself in history and political science. He is currently completing a doctorate in War Studies at RMC.

NOTES

1. Stockdale was shot down over North Vietnam in 1965 and was the senior United States Navy prisoner-of-war in Hanoi for eight years. He was tortured fifteen times, held in leg irons for two years, and kept in solitary confinement for four years.


