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In My View

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IN MY VIEW

THE HEART OF AN OFFICER

Sir:

Admiral Stravridis and Captain Hagerott's thoughtful article ("The Heart of an Officer: Joint, Interagency, and International Operations and Navy Career Development," Spring 2009) has identified an educational and training problem faced by the United States Navy that also challenges most, if not all, of the navies with which the USN operates. Achieving the right balance between the demands of operating the Navy itself and of ensuring that the Navy is employed to best effect has puzzled naval leaders for hundreds of years. At the end of the eighteenth century, Admiral Howe told King George III that "in our service [the Royal Navy] the attention is carried so long alone to seamanship that few officers are formed, and that a knowledge of the military is necessary to open the ideas to the directing [of] large fleets" (cited in N. A. M. Rodger, *The Command of the Ocean: A Naval History of Britain, 1649–1815* [London: Allen Lane, 2004]). As the authors of this article implicitly suggest, if naval officers are not in the forefront of Joint and Interagency operations, those activities will not receive the full benefit which naval capabilities can bring to the exploitation of the maritime environment—nor will that environment ever receive the appropriate level of consideration of its potential. Yet naval warfare, naval operations and the "raise, train and sustain" elements of maintaining a navy have never been more complex and never more demanding. If sufficient expert officers are not provided for these absolutely fundamental requirements, then the very purpose of the navy is at question. A navy that cannot go in harm's way—whether that harm be due to natural or human causes—is not a navy.

But how is it all to be fitted in? How can we be sure that a navy is effectively operated and supported while at the same time officers are prepared and provided for appointments outside the sea service, which themselves require many

skills which may not be of direct relevance to the vital day to day business of the navy?

The USN is in some ways in a better situation than other naval services, in others more difficult. It is so much larger than any other navy that it has the ability to sustain specialisation to a much greater degree—and with that an ability to provide worthwhile careers for those who wish to excel in a particular area. But its unrestricted-line concept is not something that the navies of the Commonwealth in particular have ever felt it possible to adopt. They prefer to have specialist engineers with seaman (or warfare) officers who are very much the operators, in terms of seamanship, navigation and maritime warfare. The Commonwealth argument, and there is a lot in it, is that the demands of the profession are so complex that it is too much to expect an officer to master engineering duties, in particular those required for the ship as a platform (such as nuclear power), as well as those of the seaman and warfare officer. It has been remarked that the British system works best for a ship and the American best for a navy—and there is justice in the observation. Even so, the Commonwealth navies are being challenged by the same problems that face the USN as they move into an increasingly Joint environment and necessarily acquire skill sets which may seem to have little relevance to the bridge or combat information center of a warship (or its engine room). Another and wider dimension of challenge for the navies of the west which cannot go unremarked is how to meet the needs of the increasing number of female officers, who may require more flexible career structures in order to balance their family lives with those of their profession. And, with increasing numbers of career couples, similar flexibility will need to be available to their partners.

Some realities may need to be accepted. The first, as the authors suggest, is that a degree of specialisation is necessary from the first. Officers cannot humanly cover all the bases of the naval profession. Something has to be left to others.

However, notwithstanding the caveats put by the authors about the dangers of an ageing profession and the challenges of mixed-gender and partnered careers mentioned above, the second must be, even with specialisation, that the professional formation of all but the most exceptional sea officer may still be somewhat longer than those of the other services. This may only be a matter of a couple of years but, if considered in terms of seagoing service, those years may be vital to the maintenance of the necessary competencies. If there is one consistent lesson from naval history it is that navies whose leaders possess extensive seagoing experience perform better than those without it. Even with the potential benefits of increasing use of simulation and other “immersion” techniques for training, this reality is unlikely to change.

The third is that much more attention needs to be paid to the continuum of naval education and training and the interaction between that continuum and the acquisition of professional experience. Generation Y have a thirst for self-improvement and for gaining qualifications. This needs to be encouraged but it also needs to be guided. Any survey of the external degrees being attempted by many naval officers in their own time would suggest that a significant proportion have been embarked upon with an eye to a career outside the navy, not the needs of the naval service. Navies need to pre-empt such selections with encouragement of study programs that really do meet the service needs as well as those of the individual.

The structure suggested by the authors provides an excellent basis for devising career streams and paths for education but more needs to be done to manage each officer as part of the effort to formalize the intent of career development. Individual guidance should relate not only to the formal qualifications that an officer attempts to gain but, to put it formally, to encouraging an interior intellectual life. Even the demands of long and arduous days at sea, with the accompanying watches, broken sleep and confined quarters, should not prevent officers reflecting not only on what have been termed the “primary” elements of their profession—their duties in the ship—but the “secondary” and “tertiary” as well. The “primary” guidance will always be something to come from a Captain, the Executive Officer and the Heads of Department (as well as the warrant officers and chiefs!), but modern communications and information systems offer the potential for mentoring from ashore in ways that have never before been possible. Retired and serving senior officers, academics and others with expertise in the naval profession need to be enlisted to put such mentoring on a more systematic basis. This aspect of career management is not a matter to be left to the posters.

The fourth reality, and it has application to other countries than the United States, is that a much wider conception of Joint Professional Military Education (JPME) needs to be devised in order to recognize and provide for the technical experts and their careers. There is much more to Jointery than operations and operational planning, and strong arguments need to be developed to support this proposition. The fact is that, as they become more senior, the navy’s technical experts have the potential to contribute across significant parts of modern Defence organisations. Their technical expertise and management skills should not confine them within their own organisation. The British indicated the potential in this approach some years ago when a senior Army officer, with deep technical and project management expertise, was placed in charge of the project for the Type 45 air defence destroyer, now entering service. All the military

services need to think harder about these technical specialists and achieve as much alignment as possible in their professional development.

All in all, as the authors suggest, navies need to look hard at the ways they prepare their people for the challenges of the future—and be seen, not only by their own officers but by governments and other agencies, as doing so. If they do not, they risk becoming marginalised in a world which is not quick to see the importance of the maritime dimension.

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