

pointer

<http://www.mindef.gov.sg/safti/pointer>

November 2009

on **COMMAND** MG NG CHEE KHERN



Editorial Board

Advisor	BG Lim Teck Yin
Chairman	COL Ng Kin Yi
Members	COL Harris Chan
	COL Yong Wui Chiang
	COL Chee Wai Mun
	LTC Irvin Lim
	LTC Tay Chee Bin
	MS Judith d'Silva
	MR Wong Chee Wai
	MR Kuldip Singh
	MR Tem Thiam Hoe
	SWO Jeffrey Chung
Editor	MS Sally Ho
Assistant Editor	MR Sim Li Kwang

Published by
POINTER: Journal of the Singapore Armed Forces
SAFTI MI
500 Upper Jurong Road
Singapore 638364
website: www.mindef.gov.sg/safti/pointer

First published in 2009
Copyright © 2009 by the Government of the Republic of Singapore.

All rights reserved. The articles in this publication are not to be reproduced in part or in whole without the consent of the Ministry of Defence.

Produced by
touche design

Contents

About the Author **ii**

On Command **1**

About the **Author**

MG Ng Chee Khern assumed his current appointment as Chief of Air Force on 24 Mar 06. A qualified F-16 and F-5 Fighter Pilot, he has served as Director of Joint Operations and Planning Directorate, Chief of Staff (Air Staff) and Commander of Tengah Air Base. MG Ng is a President's Scholar and SAF Overseas Scholar. He graduated with a Bachelor of Arts Degree in Philosophy, Politics and Economics, and a Master of Arts Degree from University of Oxford, U.K., and attained a Master in Public Administration from Harvard University, U.S.A. MG Ng has also attended the prestigious Air Command and Staff College in the U.S.A. For his significant contributions to Singapore and the SAF, MG Ng was awarded the Public Administration Medal (Gold)(Military) in 2005.

ON COMMAND

Introduction

1. The Commanding Officer (CO) tour was personally the most enjoyable tour for me. It had a balanced spread of intellectual, operational and people-type issues, and there was considerable mandate to make independent decisions with a real, immediate and tangible impact on the lives of the people under my charge. But while the experience was enjoyable, looking back, I often feel that there were things that I could have done differently or done better – if only I had known then. This is partly because there has not been any document that addresses the crux of the issue of what it means for somebody to be a good CO. As a result, most of us end up learning on the job, using trial-and-error to decide what is best for our units and ourselves. By the time we find the right formula, it is often time to move on to the next appointment. Hence, in this note, let me share with you my thoughts on what being an effective CO, and what effective command in general, mean. I hope this will allow future commanders to assume their appointments in a better position to know what to expect.

Strengthening Deterrence

2. In another piece I wrote, “On Staff Work”, I said that it was important to distinguish between *ends* and *means*, the *why* and *what* as opposed to the *how*. What is the *end* of being a commander? Traditionally, the commander’s end is to fight successfully and win battles. But not everyone agrees with this. Sun Tzu said that the best commanders win battles without fighting. In Sun Tzu’s thinking, the best stratagems in war are those that undermine the enemy’s will to fight so badly that he gives up, or those plans that are so devious that the enemy is put in a position where he feels that further fighting and resistance are futile.
3. The thinking on war has evolved considerably. In past centuries, there were no Ministries of *Defence*. There were only Ministries of *War*. The expensive militaries that countries built up were meant to fight. Their purpose in life was unequivocally to fight and win battles, thereby aggrandising the country’s honour, territories, or economic and strategic superiority. It was only in the aftermath of the Great War on the Western Front that a growing revulsion of war became more pervasive. While few countries have renounced war as a final resort to defend themselves, the tremendous destruction in the First and the Second World Wars meant that countries no longer accepted war as a routine activity they could indulge in as a matter of course in their conduct with one another. Therefore the importance of *deterrence* grew. This is a peculiar concept in the history of warfare: that one would spend billions of dollars on a military whose purpose, ideally, is *not* to fight.

4. An RSAF that is not only capable but seen by its potential aggressors to be capable is the main way in which we contribute to deterrence and the continuation of peace. One reason why others may contemplate taking liberties with Singapore is our lack of strategic depth. The lack of strategic depth implies that one has a shortage of physical space and time to make political and military decisions and to take proper actions and responses. The RSAF is in a unique position to contribute to reducing such vulnerabilities. Our high state of readiness and our suite of sensors and air defence systems buy time for our political leadership to make decisions without undue pressure. The RSAF provides the SAF with a long reach. This reach increases the vulnerabilities of any potential adversary and levels the mutual vulnerabilities.
5. But deterrence is not just about capable systems and weapons. We must show that our people are able and have the will to operate these systems. A commander's role in deterrence is to ensure mission success. Mission success in operations, exercises and other peacetime taskings is the surest demonstration of the RSAF's ability to fight effectively, without fighting. Successful peacetime air defence responses tell the people watching us that the RSAF has the will and ability to defend the country. Being successful in peace support, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief missions, apart from their intrinsic contributions to the well-being of people, indicates that the RSAF is able to raise its level of operations to a higher level if needed. Strong results at multilateral and bilateral exercises tell our adversaries that if they fight us in combat, we will defeat them. Putting up a good performance at major events such as the Global Air Power Conference and the National Day Parade further demonstrates that we are a well-organised and flexible outfit capable of delivering on a wide range of taskings. In each of these missions, success reinforces the message that the RSAF can and will win a fight.

Diplomacy, Making a Useful Difference to International Peace, Security and Stability, and Building National Policy Space

6. But deterrence must be complemented by diplomacy and contributions to international stability and security through success in operations-other-than-war. Without diplomacy, deterrence creates unnecessary tension. If we can be friends with everybody, that is even better than having to deter potential enemies. Diplomacy and contributions to international peace and security build up national policy space and create strategic depth for us in the time dimension. It defers the day we are likely to have to face aggression from potential adversaries, and it gives us more forewarning in the event of any such impending aggression.

If and when we do have to face a hostile country, having other countries that are friends with us also increases our response options.

7. To the RSAF, good defence relations are important for many reasons. It allows us to train and conduct large-scale exercises around the world, enables us to enhance our professional skills and benchmark against advanced air forces, and provides us with continued access to advanced technology. At the same time, we seek to bring value to the forces that we train with, so that they can work with us and learn from us too. This is a virtuous circle. Being capable makes it more likely that others will collaborate with us; collaboration with others in turn makes us a more capable Air Force.
8. All commanders have a role in cultivating relations. The most effective way we can contribute to diplomacy and building policy space is, again, by achieving success in our missions. Mission success showcases the RSAF as a useful and capable partner for others to collaborate with. Being successful in the peacetime operations we undertake shows that Singapore is committed to and capable of playing our part in building security as a responsible member of the international community. Strong results when we train with foreign partners tell our friends that we can hold our own among the best and can be called upon as an equal partner when the need arises.
9. A commander is a representative of Singapore and the RSAF. This is true whether we are part of a delegation visiting another air force, in overseas detachments working with foreign counterparts, in the Air Defence and Operations Command fronting our communications with foreign aircraft, in Paya Lebar Airbase receiving foreign guests, or acting personally as an officer-in-attendance to a foreign official visiting Singapore. On the one hand, we need good policy instincts. This is the ability to understand our wider defence diplomacy objectives and act in ways that support the attainment of these objectives. It is only with the right instincts that we will say and do the right things to our foreign counterparts. At the other extreme of having strategic instincts, we must pay attention to details. Making friends at the national level and making friends at the personal level is not very different in many ways. Cultivating good relations at both levels requires time, effort, thoughtfulness and sensitivity. When interacting with foreign guests, even the smallest hospitality details matter, such as their meals and transport arrangements. It is through our attention to such details that we convey our thoughtfulness and show that we value the relationships with our partners. In addition, at both levels, if we can be helpful to our friends in their times of need, we would also be more likely to build lasting friendships.

Achieving Mission Success and Command Effectiveness

10. If our efforts at diplomacy and making friends fail, and we are also unsuccessful at preventing war by deterring the enemy, we would have to defeat him swiftly and decisively. Whether it is in large-scale conventional wars, exercises, peacetime taskings, peace support operations, humanitarian assistance or other forms of operations-other-than-war, at the heart of mission success is the command effectiveness of a CO.
11. What constitutes command effectiveness? The most commonly discussed aspect of this in the SAF is the leadership dimension. Michael Howard says that successful leaders “persuade people willingly to endure hardships, usually prolonged, and incur dangers, usually acute, that if left to themselves they will do their utmost to avoid”. Leadership is thus concerned with motivating and inspiring people. Providing such direct leadership is easier if one were leading by example, enduring the same dangers as the led. This aspect of leading from the front is one dimension of command. A CO is the highest level of a “fighting” commander in the RSAF who will lead from the front. On many missions, we will fight with the rest of our unit. If we are prepared to face the same dangers as our men, and therefore lead from the front and lead by example, we will have what it takes to inspire them to go into battle with us.
12. But effective command is not only about leading from the front. Leading from the front by example, or what John Keegan calls “heroic leadership”, is exemplified by Alexander the Great. He always led by example from the front and was wounded many times. This form of leadership was necessary at that time. His followers would have thought him a coward not worthy of leading them if he had not led from the front and fought side-by-side with his troops. But the weakness of this approach was that if Alexander had died, there would have been no empire, as no one else could have done what Alexander did. By Roman times, it was recognised that such individualised forms of leadership were not the most suitable for a polity. Most Roman commanders did not fight at the front. As commanders moved further back from the actual front-line fighting, it became more difficult to command people into battle. Nonetheless, it remains crucial to inspire people into battle, because otherwise there would be cynicism towards the moral authority of the senior leadership that would be detrimental to the war effort. This was the lesson of the “chateau” style of leadership of the Great War on the Western Front, and probably of the Argentine and Iraqi leadership in the Falklands and Gulf Wars respectively.

13. Without leading from the front, we must still be able to inspire by commanding from the back. The CO of a modern fighting outfit does not just lead from the front. Often, instead of fighting with the rest of the unit, we have to supervise other areas such as mission planning, logistics preparations or the training of personnel. John Pimlott defines such command as “the direction, co-ordination and effective use of military force”. He also defined control as “the management of command: the assessment and dissemination of information needed to direct military force”. Commanding somebody to go into battle is different from leading somebody into battle. The commander in this case shares none of the soldiers’ dangers at the frontlines.
14. One common occurrence with people on the ground is that in response to a good commander they truly like, they will say things like “I will die *for* you”. Notice that it is not “I will die *with* you”. What constitutes the ability to command effectively from the back such that our men are willing to die *for* us? On the one hand, they must trust that we have the tactical acumen to put them into advantageous positions, when they go into combat. The ability to put our men into superior positions in combat is very dependent on the abilities of command as defined by Pimlott. On the other hand, they must believe that we have empathy with them, that we value their lives as they value their own lives. They must believe that we have tried our utmost not to risk their lives unnecessarily, that in general we have done what we can to look after their interests and welfare.
15. A football analogy is useful here. A commander who leads from the front, often the junior commander, is like the captain of a football team. He has to be able to assert leadership, which is not too difficult because he is with his men, able to very directly influence the mood and the will to fight. A CO is like a player-manager, who sometimes leads from the front, playing with the rest of the players, and at other times commands from the back, strategising and planning for the rest to play. The senior commanders, in turn, are like the managers, who will command completely from the back. Why our men will allow us to command them from the front is not the same as why they will allow us to command them from the back. The former requires courage and bravery; the latter requires planning, managerial and intellectual ability, tactical and strategic acumen, and our men must believe we have their interests at heart. To achieve mission success, a CO needs both types of abilities – of bringing people into operations and of ordering them into operations.

16. The second aspect of command effectiveness is the managerial dimension. Leadership is about defining visions, setting ambitions for the organisation, looking ahead to the future, and conceiving initiatives to adapt to changing environments. In short, it deals with a unit's purpose and produces change that brings it forward. Management is about maintaining control, allocating resources, implementing initiatives and working efficiently. It ensures that the unit delivers its objectives within the stipulated time and budget. Some related views are that leadership entails problem identification, while management is primarily concerned with problem solving; management works *within* the system, whereas leadership works *on* the system; and leadership is about doing the right things, while management is about doing things right.

17. In most situations, we will need to apply a combination of leadership and management. How much of each is needed depends on the context in which our unit operates. In a state of transformation and change, where we are in the process of transiting into a vastly different force structure, leadership would probably be emphasizedemphasised more strongly. This is because of the need for creativity, imagination, and "thinking outside of the box" to generate new ideas that will allow a breakthrough beyond current thinking borders. On the other hand, when the unit is at a stage of consolidation and focusing on the safe and effective operationalisation of new platforms and capabilities, as the RSAF was in the 1990s till a few years ago, management will take on greater significance. In this situation, one should avoid creating a state of flux and more rightly place his focus on achieving taskings safely and effectively.

18. There is a lot of prior work to be done before one is ready to lead and command people into battle, and before one is ready to manage a unit well. I refer to these as the "sideways", "upwards" and "downward" responsibilities of command. Sideways, we have to build a shared consensus with our leadership group on how to manage our unit. It is only with a sufficiently cohesive group of leaders who share a common conviction that we can carry the ground. Before I took over as CAF, I actively forged a sense of common purpose among my senior officers. I let everyone voice their views, listened to opinions and encouraged debates. When my senior officers saw that their opinions were incorporated into my decisions, the decisions in essence became *our* decisions. Many of them then shared the sense of conviction and commitment in owning what we intended to do.

19. Upwards, we need to engage our superiors. They are the ones who will give us the vital support we require. If they don't have confidence in us, they will not give us the breathing space or the resources to do what we consider necessary or desirable. It is only after we have gained their trust that they will give us more space to exercise our own judgement and get things done.
20. Downwards, we need to look after our subordinates. To fight in war effectively and to achieve mission success in general, we must prepare our people through tough and realistic training. As commanders, we can be good operators by demanding the highest standards of ourselves, but we will become good commanders only if we demand the same standards of our staff. Ensure that our people are not just going through the motions and don't let them get away with easy answers during training because there are no easy answers in war. Infuse discipline in them because discipline is ultimately what makes them overcome their fears, including the fear of losing their lives. Pay attention to details, question and probe. If we fail to rigorously question our people's actions, we are letting them, and ourselves, get away with easy answers. If we allow standards to slip, over time our ability to achieve the mission will be weakened.
21. The other important way to look after our people is to ensure that training, while tough and realistic, is conducted safely. Mishaps mean that we lose lives. Losing lives, apart from the tragedy it constitutes, reduces our deterrence value and the public's confidence in us. The RSAF aims for zero accidents. A record of zero accidents is achievable but it has to start with our mindset. Few drivers get through a lifetime without meeting an accident, but none will start driving every morning in anticipation of meeting an accident. Every driver believes each morning that he can go through the day without an accident. Flying should be the same. We should approach safety and zero accidents event by event, day by day, as there are no permanent solutions. If we approach each event with the belief that it can be safely completed, before we know it, a week, a month, and a year would have passed without a mishap.
22. Beyond training and operations, looking downwards requires us to manage and empathize with our staff. When I was a CO, there were several occasions when I worked very closely with the Air Manpower Department to secure re-engagement bonuses for my staff. On another occasion, I managed to get recognition for a degree that my technician had worked very hard to attain on a part-time basis. I did all these things behind the scenes but it soon became clear to my subordinates that they had a CO who cared, and

who did not feel that his men's issues are of no great concern. It is only when we take the effort to empathise with our people that we will appreciate that seemingly minor matters to us may mean much more to them. However, there will be other occasions when the responsibility of the commander does not lie in "fighting" for our people. When there are sound reasons for policies and directions, it is the commander's responsibility to explain the rationale to our men. When our men have legitimate ground concerns, we should stand up for their concerns. But when the ground concerns are not legitimate, we must represent the organization/organisation and stand up for the policies. Don't just pass the buck upwards. A commander must set the right tone because if we behave inappropriately or reinforce the wrong beliefs, our men will follow.

23. An effective commander is one who is able to successfully harmonise the wills and interests of his leadership group, his superiors and his subordinates, both in operations and daily peacetime work. At times there will be a need to balance the interests of these different stakeholders. But it is not entirely about trade-offs, because some efforts will mutually reinforce one another. We will gain our superiors' trust if we lead our subordinates to achieve our missions successfully, and in turn our superiors will give us more resources and support to realise our people's needs and wishes. If we fail to lead our people effectively, we encourage our superiors to micro-manage, and their increased scrutiny will in turn make things harder for us and our subordinates. There is no magic ratio. As commanders, it is up to us to decide what the right balance should be.

Developing the Future Force

24. Achieving mission success means that the RSAF is capable today. But it is by building the future force that we will continue to be capable into the future. It is not always easy to prepare for the future as the mentality of "if it ain't broke, don't fix it" is a very deep-seated one. But this is a mentality that we must overcome. Our political leadership has often said that Singapore "punches above our weight". This is because, compared to bigger countries with greater strategic weight, Singapore, although small, can nonetheless influence many regional geopolitical and economic trends, and international geopolitical and economic decisions. Singapore can do so only because we have been able to anticipate the strategic or paradigmatic changes in the environment that we operate in and we have been willing to do something about it. If we do not and someone else does, he will become more effective as the environment changes. For the military, this ability to be ahead of our time is

crucial. It means not only success or failure, but also, literally, life and death for individuals and nations. In World War Two, the French and British tanks were superior to those of the Germans, but they were slow in understanding how to use their tanks, and dispersed them to provide piecemeal firepower support to the infantry. Consequently, the Germans, who massed tanks in armoured Panzer Armies, overran the Allies. Similarly, the Americans, who mastered the large-scale application of airpower in the form of massed aircraft carrier operations, overran the Japanese in the vast Pacific theatre.

25. But let me set the record straight. The foremost task of a commander is to ensure that our current missions are achieved safely and effectively. If we have problems in accomplishing our current missions, our job is first and foremost to fix those problems. However, once we are on top of our current missions, it is imperative that we look beyond. Developmental work to build the future force is not the opposite of mission success; it is part of ensuring success in the longer time horizon. One reason for Singapore's success is the government's ability to plan with a long- term time horizon because of Singapore's political stability. We should not look at mission success only for current operations because that would be akin to fire- fighting. Being successful at dealing with current operations does not in itself lead to long-term or sustained mission success. Commanders must be able to deliver sustained high levels of performance and not just the ability to perform in the short-term. We must not be contented with the status quo, but always look to developing our unit to ensure that we continue to be relevant and effective into the future.

26. It is hence imperative that as commanders, we must not see ourselves merely as a link-man or a mouthpiece passing on information from higher headquarters. We are change agents. At a recent command interview board, a candidate said that the responsibility of a commander is to value-add. It struck me that "value-add" is not always a good metaphor because it conjures up a production line where the commander is just one of many operators who add something onto a product coming through the line. Similarly, the metaphor "holding the fort" is not always appropriate because it suggests a passive mindset, rather than one that seeks to set forth and improve things. Value-adding is sufficient in some cases, such as when we have good, talented and competent staff. In such cases, our main role could well be to guide them along to achieve their own true potential. But in other cases, such as when our staff isare not up to the task, the mental model of value-adding is not appropriate. When things are breaking down, or when a responsibility is solely the task of a commander, it is incumbent on us to "call the shots" or create the value, and not just "value-add". We

must try to change and improve things because we are in the position to make a real and positive difference to the lives and livelihood of our people. We are also responsible for a significant amount of combat power through which we can contribute to the security and future of the country.

27. One way to create the capacity to undertake ambitious developmental work is by empowering our staff. Encourage our people to take initiative. Don't micro-manage. Many of us say, tongue-in-cheek, that a decision is above our pay grade. But I also often say that a decision is below my pay grade because it should be taken by levels below me. Let our staff decide if something is within their scope to address. However, commanders must also be hard-nosed about what empowerment is. It is not about letting our subordinates do whatever they wish. In another interview board recently, a candidate was asked how he would run a squadron. He said he believed in empowering his subordinates. The board asked him what he would do if his squadron had just been through an accident or an audit in which they performed badly. The candidate insisted he would stick with empowerment. In the end, the board had to explain that empowerment is especially useful in releasing the energy and creativity of good people, but one must not be naïve in thinking that every person has the ability to work himself out of a bad situation or the desire to work flat-out for higher purposes. Letting such subordinates do what they wish is not empowerment but an abdication of responsibility. Even if we empower our staff, we must continue to hold them to account. We have to put in place means to collectively analyse events with them and assess progress. One way to ensure our people are on the right track is to constantly reiterate the first-order objectives to them. That allows our staff to make decisions on their own without always referring back to us. This is similar to managing through command intent.
28. Besides developmental work, the other key component of building the future force is to nurture future leaders. It is easy to overlook this because such efforts are time-consuming, and the gains are intangible. But grooming our followers is crucial because we are helping the RSAF to nurture our leaders of the future and ensure that we will continue to have people capable of leading the organisation. We should not engage in favouritism but there is no need to be egalitarian either – we are perfectly justified in identifying the few who stand out above their peers and groom them further. Grooming and developing people is a commander's core responsibility and not something we do only when we have time. At times, however, grooming need not even take particular effort, as long as we are doing the right things. Towards the end of my CO tour, some of my young lieutenants were enthusiastically recounting the lessons they had learnt that day during the end-of-day debrief. But they

had little regard for properly documenting those lessons. I explained that a key difference between a primitive society and a civilisation was a civilisation's ability to capture, archive and transmit knowledge in written form. Part of being a good commander was to ensure that the corporate memory generated within our unit was rigorously documented for future generations to learn from. At that time, I had no idea whether what I said had any real impact. But 13 years on, one of the pilots present that day told me that partly as a result of what I said, he was able to do his work well in his posting to the Air Plans Department. Indeed, one of the most satisfying aspects of my command tours was seeing my staff develop and mature as officers and individuals.

29. One of the best ways to groom people is by opening up our thoughts and thought processes to them, and explaining to them the considerations behind our decisions. I personally do so by holding frequent dialogue sessions and small-group interviews where I share what is on my mind. This gives our staff the background information to understand the rationale for the things we do. We should also create the right environment for people to contribute. Don't constrain their potential because of fear they may outshine us. Many of us will find in our own experiences that how well we did in a job depended in large part on how much our bosses allowed us to contribute, and how much he welcomed our contributions. Similarly, how well our staff perform depends to a large extent on the environment we set for them. A senior SAF officer once remarked that if you cannot make yourself useful, at least get out of the way. If we find ourselves running out of good ideas, let our subordinates flourish and take initiative. If we give them our support and encouragement, they may surprise us with what they are capable of.

Fostering Commitment to Defence

30. To build an RSAF that is capable into the future, it is not enough to focus only on missions and competencies. To ensure that our sense of motivation and purpose remain strong, it is vitally important to ensure that our own people, and the public in general, stay engaged with the RSAF, the SAF and the security of the country. Motivating people, in the short term at least, is arguably more difficult in the public sector than in the private sector. The private sector has the option of firing and recruiting new staff. The public sector does not really have this easy option. We have generally less leverage over reward and punishment. Our staff may not have as clear an incentive to work hard because more work does not so clearly bring more immediate and tangible reward. The phenomenon of people complaining to their bosses that they are working too hard is more rare in the private sector.

31. The task of motivating our people will be easier if they understand the standing of our air force in the world. The RSAF is something that we can be proud of. Many, if not most, air forces do not have as wide a range of capabilities as the RSAF. Most air forces operate some fixed wing and rotary wing transports, as we do. But if fighters were taken into consideration, many air forces would be out of the running. If we add attack helicopters, even more air forces would drop out. Next, if we include ground-based air defence systems, most air forces would drop out. If we add in UAVs, there would be only a handful of air forces left with such a diverse and wide range of capabilities. And once we include the fact that we also operate helicopters and ground-based air defence systems for our Army, and fly maritime patrol aircraft and helicopters for our Navy, we could perhaps be quite a unique air force in the world.
32. There are also more bread-and-butter issues that can affect the well-being and commitment of our servicemen. For instance, good terms and conditions of service and sound human resource policies are important in keeping our servicemen engaged with the organisation. It is therefore important that commanders stay on top of and be knowledgeable about human resource policies, so that they can understand, explain and properly apply these policies. However, human resource policies are not the only factor. Commanders on the ground are ultimately the ones who decide the working life of people on a day-to-day basis. Small efforts on our part can go a long way to improving working life. In my experience, people's complaints about work or happiness at work often pertain to their immediate bosses. A technician of mine once had to visit the dentist urgently during a Korat detachment. To our surprise, there was a regulation that a serviceman cannot claim expenses for a dental visit when overseas. I could not understand the rationale and took up the issue with the Manpower Division. After much discussion, I obtained the reimbursement for my technician. I believe that he felt more strongly about belonging to the squadron after this incident.
33. We should be conscious that as commanders, we are bosses in our own right and what we do, and fail to do, will find its way into the conversations of our subordinates. Simple efforts can make a difference. When I was a CO, during exercises, I used to update all of my crew, including my technicians, about the progress of the missions. I believed that my ground crew would find their work more meaningful if they were kept informed of the outcomes of the missions that the pilots were flying, which they were instrumental in preparing for. One of my Warrant Officers recently told me that indeed, by giving him an awareness of the bigger picture to which he contributed, he was able to attach more meaning to his work. Outside of exercises, simple things such as keeping people informed of upcoming events

and adhering to the training programme give them more control over their time and reduce uncertainty in their personal lives. Holding regular career planning, posting meetings and interviews allows us to understand our staff's interests and aspirations better and to secure what they want. Being present at ranking boards to represent our staff is a responsibility that no self-respecting commander should abdicate. None of these are difficult; they require only some forward planning and being generally thoughtful and considerate of the welfare of our people.

34. Another way to enhance commitment is to consciously foster cohesion, team spirit, trust and friendship. When this happens, colleagues become friends, working relationships become more vibrant, and the distinction between work and personal lives becomes blurred. A signboard in 149 Squadron reminds everyone that "you don't work here, you belong here". If our people had this mentality, the unit would be a very pleasant place to be in. As a commander, it is important to understand what works for our men. Several years after my CO tour, my former technicians shared with me that the two things they remembered most about my tour were that first, they had never played so much football in their lives, and second, that I was the first CO who had ever invited them home for dinner. The former they enjoyed, the latter touched them. I did those things at the time because I knew they enjoyed football, and I felt it was right to ask them home for dinner given that they might one day have to fight for me. Both contributed to the cohesion of my squadron even though I did not know that they would make such a lasting and favourable impression on my men. As our people form deep friendships and bonds, we will enhance not only their emotional commitment, but also the operational effectiveness of our unit.

35. Conversely, if we don't trust one another and work as a team in peacetime, there is little chance that we can operate as an effective unit during operations. People fight at great personal risk not just, and sometimes not even mainly, for the country, but more for their buddies whom they do not wish to let down. They fight because they want to stand up among their friends. One of the worst things that a commander can do to affect team spirit is to behave in a way that is seen as being calculative. When I was CO, I often recounted a story to my officers and men about how, when I was a pilot trainee, a course mate demanded from another course mate that he be repaid a parking coupon the latter had borrowed. My point was that we should not "count five-cents-ten-cents" and be calculative towards each other, given that we are expected to go to war with each other, to check each other's six. For that to be possible, we have to literally trust each other with our lives. If in everyday life we are calculative, it is next to impossible to trust each other with our lives. As commanders,

it is also important to build trust and cohesion with our staff so that we command not only using the formal authority of rank and appointment, but also through our personal influence. This personal influence can be even stronger if we get the families and spouses of our staff involved in our activities. This is something I have devoted a lot of effort to over the years, because I believe that the support and involvement of our families and spouses is crucial to building a committed and cohesive team. If our spouses are friends with one another, there will be a greater chance that we will also be close to one another.

36. One of the cultures that interferes with our efforts to build commitment is what we refer to as the “just do it” culture. Too often, we complete our taskings highly professionally, but spare little effort to recognise achievements and good work. We must be conscious of showing appreciation. This is not about being contrived or hypocritical; it is about recognising that good work deserves to be complimented and praises should not be withheld simply because the product is not perfect. We need to celebrate individuals and achievements in the same way we profile, for example, our capability developments. Celebrating achievements not only creates good mutual feelings and cohesion, but it also provides an avenue outside of ranking and posting boards for commanders to act as an advocate for our people. Commanders should always look for ways to highlight our unit and our people. I know that the squadron commander who succeeded me did a good job of looking for opportunities for his unit to participate in certain exercises, to host important visits, and to anchor certain operations. Through them, he showcased the people we had in the unit, many of whom subsequently achieved promotions and advancements mainly because of how he profiled them. There is no need to say much about an individual when others can clearly see the quality of their work. Their work becomes the best and most effective advocate for them.
37. Beyond the people of the RSAF, the other part of fostering commitment is to secure public support for the mission of defence. For MINDEF and the SAF to be sustainable over the long term, we need the continued commitment of the Singaporean public. The RSAF regularly reaches out to the public to showcase the latest capability developments and instances of exceptional individual achievements. We also organise and stage performances every year at the National Day Parade, the RSAF Open House, and smaller events such as the National Runway Cycling & Skating event, to enhance support from the public. But a commander’s role in engaging the public does not lie mainly in these ad hoc events. More crucially, it rests upon what we do within our units on a routine basis. The RSAF and the wider Singaporean public are not entirely disparate groups. Significant portions of the public are NSmen of the RSAF or of the SAF. The mission of defence may not be intuitive for many Singaporeans,

and it will not be enough to rely on a few events or a small band of regulars to expound on its importance. NSmen are our ambassadors to the public as they are the people who can most effectively carry our messages to their friends and relatives. Giving them meaningful roles will not only serve to enhance their sense of contribution but also help to create capacity to undertake development work. Commanders must thus engage our NSmen and secure their commitment to our mission. It is through them that we can best contribute to building Singaporeans' commitment to defence.

Mastering Ourselves

38. A senior officer who read the preceding part of this note told me that I had not talked much about core values. I said that I did not want to use a core values framework for this note because that would just be teaching commanders how to be a person, rather than to deal with all the other things they have to be responsible for knowing and doing. It is important for commanders to understand, first of all, the ends for which they exist, and the responsibilities they are expected to shoulder. The reader may have noticed that the *ends* of being a commander in the SAF, of achieving deterrence, conducting diplomacy and building policy space, achieving mission success, developing a future force, and fostering a commitment to defence, are the five strategic outcomes of the RSAF, which are in turn aligned to the Desired Outcomes articulated at the MINDEF and the SAF levels.
39. But having addressed the ends of command, we must turn our attention to the “heart” of command. This includes the importance of core values, and it refers not only to the core values of a commander, but more generally, to his personality and character attributes. The tri-dimensional Be-Know-Do model, or the Heart-Head-Hands model, correspond to the need to have values, knowledge and skills respectively. Command is not just about knowing and doing the right things. It is ultimately a matter of our values, of our heart, and of what it means and takes to *be* a commander.
40. The RSAF provides our COs with considerable resources to make a difference. In the private sector, they would probably be heading a middle-sized enterprise with an annual turnover of millions and taking charge of a team of around 100 people, as most of our COs are doing. But if this makes the job of a commander easier, it also increases the demands on him because it means that the responsibility of command is a heavy one. We will be called upon to make decisions that can affect both the short-term prowess and the long-term sustainable performance of the air force. The rest of the RSAF will look to us to assess,

for instance, whether our unit is able to undertake new taskings. Within our unit, we will have to decide even issues such as the time to conduct the start-of-day briefs and end-of-day debriefs. We are no longer acting as a staff officer or an adviser. We can no longer make remarks loosely as there is a high likelihood that our words will be implemented as directions. We are the decision-makers who have to carry the burdens and outcomes of our decisions. In making decisions, we are also often very alone in making them and in having to carry them through. We will often have to lift ourselves from what we naturally feel and we will have to carry not only our own, but also the troubles of our people. At times, we will feel as though we have to be good at everything – a skilful operator, a clever strategist and a strong leader. It is easier to be a good operator because there are many opportunities to train ourselves and others will tell us how to improve. It is more difficult to be a good commander because there are far fewer opportunities to train ourselves, and the main way we improve is by self-reflection and self-assessment. Before we accept the responsibility of command, we must therefore be ready within ourselves to take on the challenges of being a commander.

41. To master these challenges, we must master ourselves. Command is therefore not only about having a sound intellect but also a strong moral disposition. Moral here refers to character, not morality. It refers to the character and personality aspects of moral and physical courage, of daring and caring to do things, not of intellectual or physical qualities. This is what Napoleon meant when he said that “the moral is to the physical as three is to one”. A commander must not only have knowledge and skills, but also the personality to carry through a tough fight – metaphorically in peace, literally in operations. We must prevail against obstacles, antagonists and doubters, and have the mentality that, ultimately, all problems can be tackled and solved. We must inspire, exude optimism, and possess drive, conviction and aggression that can be properly harnessed. In all these, the commander is above and beyond what somebody with staff abilities is able to do. A staffer needs mainly to know what to do. A commander is the one who carries the decisions, the ground and the organisation through all obstacles to do it. These are not unfamiliar notions. From the first day we joined the Officer Cadet School, we have been trained *To Lead, To Excel And To Overcome*.
42. One important quality that equips a commander to overcome the odds is that of having a sense of purpose. A sense of purpose is what gives us the motivation to want to improve ourselves and to see things through. It provides us with a sense of ambition and conviction, which that gives us the courage to do thingswork to improve our people and our units. It

helps us to be clear what we have to do, and to be willing and energetic enough to do it. However, a sense of purpose does not always come naturally. It is something that we develop when we start to appreciate that we are appointed for a higher purpose, and when we realise the importance of the roles that we play for the organisation and our people.

43. It is not uncommon that we will encounter setbacks in the course of command. But when it happens, it is incumbent on the commander to respond in the right way. How we behave affects the rest of our people. Recently, an officer who was my squadron pilot when I was a CO reminded me of an incident during my tour. My squadron had encountered two accidents in the span of two days during an air defence exercise. In the first incident, one of my pilots brought back the basket of a Royal Air Force tanker during an air-to-air refuelling sortie. After I examined the accident and concluded that the pilot had too hard a contact with the basket and that the accident was not due to a drogue system design or maintenance defect, I flew the next day with my flight commander to show that it was still safe to do air-to-air refuelling on our aircraft. On landing from that sortie, my flight commander had a burst tyre and the aircraft went off the runway. However, what this squadron pilot remembers today is not that there were two accidents in two days, but the fact that despite the two accidents, the squadron leadership did not panic. There were no frantic safety reviews or management reviews. Instead, the leadership took the accidents in stride, and we carried on with what we were doing without any loss of confidence. It is only when the commander exudes confidence in the face of setbacks that it can transmit itself to the rest of the squadron.
44. In addition to being confident in what we are doing, a commander must have a strong and decisive personality, and be willing to impose our will when necessary. During my CO tour, there was an occasion when my squadron S1 asked everyone to complete a charity Walk-athon card with a minimum collection of \$15 each. \$15 was not a huge sum of money even in those days and most of us were going to contribute out of our own pockets. However, one of my pilots chose to protest against the 'mandatory' contribution. I was seated at the back of the room at that point and I told the individual, and anybody else who was not interested in donating, to give me their Walk-athon cards. The individual was embarrassed and backed down. As a CO, it is our responsibility to set the moral tone of the unit, to enforce it, and not allow anyone from within or outside the squadron to degrade it. Another instance related to the issue of moral tone occurred two years ago during the RSAF NSmen Seminar. An NSman stood up during the dialogue session and complained about the requirement to exchange security passes to gain access into Air Force School and the need to wear the SAF uniform for the event. Another NSman then reminded him

that National Service was about contributing to the security of the nation and not about the SAF making life cushy for them. This embarrassed the complainant and re-established the right moral tone to the seminar. Similarly, as commanders, we must know when we need to impose our will – especially when dealing with difficult people – to prevent negative influences from pervading our units.

45. At times, it may not be easy to impose our will because of our own personality predispositions. But our personality dispositions are something that we need to rise above. I would even go to the extent of saying that we may have to change ourselves to discharge our roles as commanders. I am an introvert by nature and in my younger days, I would sit happily in a corner of the canteen to read a book. But as a commander and as CAF, I realised that I should no longer do so because others may mistakenly think of me as being aloof. Once we assume command, we must be prepared to overcome our own personality predispositions and do things that normally or privately we may prefer not to do.
46. Finally, in those cases where we feel we are truly at the end of our tether, we should not be afraid to raise the issue to our bosses. Many issues that seem to have no solutions at our level can be resolved easily by our bosses. When I was a squadron commander, I brought to the attention of the Air Operations Department that I might not be able to achieve the upgrades of all my Cat D pilots to Cat C in the one year I was given, because I had 8 Cat Ds at the same time. To my surprise, I was allowed to work out what I thought were more reasonable time frames to achieve the upgrades. We must trust that our bosses are reasonable, as long as we are clear in all conscience that we have tried our best before we raise issues.
47. This leads me to the final quality of a good commander, perhaps one of the most important. Above all, a commander must have a good sense of judgement. I have elaborated on the commander's role in achieving the five strategic outcomes of the RSAF. I have also discussed the importance of values and of imposing our will when necessary. But I have not talked much about how to choose which objective or approach is more important when some or all of our objectives conflict or require us to take different actions or approaches. You will frequently encounter this need to trade off conflicting objectives in the course of your command tour. A good sense of judgement is about knowing what is more important or of greater priority in a given situation and context. It is about knowing which is the least of all evils or the best of all goods. C.P. Snow, a noted British historian, defined judgement as "the ability to think of many matters at once, in their interdependence, their related importance,

and their consequences”. It is difficult to generalise what good judgement entails because it depends on the context. Hence, lists of principles of war are always problematic because it is not difficult to agree that any one particular principle, such as the concentration of force, is important on *some* occasions. But it is probably false to think that concentration of force is always good. When to apply a particular principle of war depends on the context and good judgement.

48. Similarly, it is not difficult to agree that being bold and courageous is *generally* a good thing in a leader. But that is not to say that it is *always* a good thing. Barbara Tuchman, a noted American historian, said in an address to the US Army War College in 1972 that “sometimes judgement will counsel boldness, as when Admiral Nimitz, against the advice of every admiral and general in his command, insisted on assaulting Kwajalein ... although this means leaving enemy-held outer islands on the American line of communications. In the event, American planes were able to keep the outer islands pounded down, while Kwajalein proved relatively undefended because the Japanese, thinking along the same lines as Nimitz’ subordinates, had convinced themselves the Americans would not attempt to assault it ... More often than not, however, judgement counsels ‘cannot’ while will says ‘can.’”

49. Let me end with an example closer to what you are likely to face in the course of your job. When I was a Base Commander, one of my COs asked my Deputy if he could cancel his unit’s night training on Valentine’s Day. He knew that this would result in several of his pilots failing to meet their night semi-annual training requirements. My Deputy said that it was up to him. If he should decide to fly on the night of Valentine’s Day, he would have to explain to his people why he had clearly messed up his flying schedule planning and put the squadron in that position. If he should choose not to fly, he would have to explain to the Base and HQ RSAF why his pilots had failed to achieve their training requirements. More important than even his inability to decide which of these objectives was of higher priority was his poor judgement in bringing the issue to the Base to resolve. I learnt later that his deputy squadron commander and his flight commander had in fact urged him to fly on Valentine’s Day and not to bring the issue up to the Base. It was extremely poor judgement to push the buck to the Base for a decision that the CO should have made himself. Being bold enough to raise the matter upwards is the wrong thing to do in this context because the courage was bereft of sound judgement.

Conclusion

50. In war, there is no second place. We either win or lose. This note has given you a sense of what it takes to be a good commander. The rest is up to you. There is no fixed formula for success. Command is a constantly evolving discipline on which there is no final word. Be realistic in your expectations. Not all efforts will improve things, not every problem can be solved in your time, and not everyone will respond the way you hope for despite your best intentions. There is no need to be pessimistic, but don't expect victories all the time either. If you approach your command tour with the right attitude and expectations, I am certain you will enjoy the experience.

Acknowledgement

While the observations and thoughts which constitute the contents of this essay were mine, it was possible to put them into a coherent whole mainly because my staff assistant, MAJ Stanley Chua Hon Kiat, had dutifully noted these thoughts and observations over a period of several years. It was also Stanley who strung these thoughts together in a first draft of this essay. I would therefore like to acknowledge the depth of contribution by Stanley to this essay.

