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MILITARY CHARACTER

By

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MILITARY CHARACTER

This article is part of a paper written in 1913 at the Naval War College, Newport, R.I., as a study of the qualities of military character, with special reference to our navy. It is not official in any sense, being only one officer's understanding of what should constitute the common ideal of character in the navy of the United States; but it was included among several on the same subject sent out for general circulation in the service. Such as it it it may not be wholly without interest for the unprofessional reader, particularly at this time; and those who favor the movement for more widespread military training may possibly find here some indication of the extensiveness and the limitation of their undertaking. And it may not be wholly without significance that officers, not the youngest, are giving serious attention to a matter that, fundamental as it is, should have been preserved unshakable along with the old traditions built upon it.

As Napoleon said, in war the moral is to the material as three to one.

The study of military character is a wide one. So many qualities of military men are equally recognizable in men of other achievement, one can scarcely separate the military from the general. In military history and biography certain underlying qualities appear again and again, while others are presented in such varied aspects as to elude clear definition and leave doubt in many cases as to the relative effects of character and circumstance. The present discussion is confined to the main features which distinguish true military character, merely touching upon the highest development, to which only the few ever attain.

As character is formed by the development of habits and temperament, so the delineation of character follows from the formulation of tradition. In the naval service we find the official expression of our military ideal in the first of the Articles for the Government of the United States Navy.

The Commanders of all fleets, squadrons, naval stations, and vessels belonging to the navy are required to show in themselves a good example of virtue, honor, patriotism, and subordination.

There is much more on personal conduct prescribed by these reverend articles as to what must and what must not be; but for a standard of character, as gentleman and officer, those four qualities are deemed sufficient. How well chosen these words are for their purpose, how high their standard, and how logically they develop the necessary attributes, are shown by their full meaning. They might well apply to all citizens, civilian as well as military. Happy indeed, and powerful in its unity, would be the state whose whole people strove actively for such an ideal.

Selecting from the many definitions only what is plainly appropriate, - "virtue" signifies, first, manly spirit; courage to do; daring in enterprise; bravery to endure and bear up against evil and danger, as well as to go forth and face them.

The brave man is not he who feels no fear, but he whose noble mind its fears subdues.

The second meaning is the practice of morality, in life and conversation; uprightness, rectitude; the opposite of vice. Thus, by the one word "virtue", our fundamental law excludes the weak and vicious, and demands good morals and strong spirit; calling for the kind of men that command respect and attention among all classes, everywhere.

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Upon this sound basis of virtue, "honor" builds a higher sense of duty, one above the average- keener, nicer, more magnanimous; a controlling sense of what is right, true, and due; probity of feeling and conduct. Honor implies loyalty and high courage, and right dealing in all cases, especially towards inferiors and dependents. It implies faithfulness to trust, even to punctiliousness in doing things whose neglect would bring no punishment and arouse but little disapprobation. In effect the law imposes on the navy the rule noblesse oblige.

Next, "patriotism" names the motive that binds all in one sacred cause, which shall rule supreme, sharing our devotion with none other. Patriotism strikes to the core: "Where the heart is right, there is true patriotism!" It is a passion which burns undiminished. It broadens the interest of the individual, develops his understanding, and exerts the strongest influence for unity.

All civic virtues, all the heroism and self-sacrifice of patriotism, spring ultimately from the habit men acquire of regarding their nation as a great organic whole, identifying themselves with its fortunes in the past as in the present, and looking forward anxiously to its future destinies. -- LECKY.

With personal character and common actuating force defined, the fourth word brings harmony of effort. "Subordination" organizes and regulates all things in due proportion. Specially, it is the state of being under control of government; subjection to rule; the habit of obedience to orders. Any idea of narrow interpretation is dispelled by the words of Burke:

That generous loyalty to rank and sex, that proud submission, that dignified obedience, that subordination of the heart, which kept alive, even in servitude itself, the spirit of an exalted freedom.

With us subordination must be read "coordination!" Nothing less could fulfill the other requirements-- virtue, honor, and patriotism. In the sense of all things ordered in proportion to their importance to the end in view, subordination, like the three other qualities, applies to life in general. In the military profession, however, its thorough inculcation is a prime requisite; the degree of intelligence pervading the sense of subordination in an army or a navy is a true measure of its efficiency.

To hold all things in due proportion necessitates mutual understanding between superior and inferior. Training in any duty is incomplete unless there be clear perception of the relation of that duty to the whole of which it is but a part. Only by close adherence to this principle can unity of effort be maintained; and in the military profession predominantly, unity means strength.

Too often the conception of subordination and discipline is tainted by the implication of arbitrariness and servility. Nothing could be more in error. Arbitrariness stamps an officer with incompetency; while servility in a subordinate arouses distrust among superiors, contempt among equals, and usually indicates oppression towards inferiors. A proper sense of subordination is conscious of no personal subjection but only the instinctive understanding of coordinate effort. It is here that training counts so much, in "the habits and spirit of soldiers - the habits of command on one side and of obedience on the other- mutual confidence between officers and men" (Wellington) Without the instinct of discipline to keep every man in his place unity and control are lost.

In four words then, virtue, honor, patriotism, and subordination, the law sums up the fundamental qualities upon which the naval service must base true efficiency. These qualities must be common to all members, growing in each one with his rise in the service. And it is indispensable that all four qualities be present. Individuals that are defective in any quality can be eliminated the same as if physically deficient; but in the organization as a whole, if one of these essentials fail of due cultivation, the attainment of maintenance of a genuine, high esprit de corps becomes impossible. Adequate material, ample resources, thoroughly developed plans, geographical and racial advantages, and marked individual ability - all may be seriously impaired, or even brought to naught, by inferior esprit de corps.

Yet though all the prime qualities are indispensable, alone they are not sufficient. Admirable in the abstract, they fail of inspiration. They are a true guide and they help to sustain, but they give no impulse. Always they remain the groundwork, the fruitful soil, in which the seeds of military character may best be cultivated to produce in a few the higher qualities of leadership, and in the mass responsiveness to leadership.

Successful leadership implies strong will. No character has force without that, for it means energy, activity, resolute persistence. It is a quality born in men, not acquired, though it may be developed and shaped by training.

Sway over others is before all else founded upon will. The one who knows best how to give the most definite expression to his will leads. A demand made with determination seldom meets with opposition. For those who are to obey, it has in it something impressive, from which they attain a sense of personal security, and this enhances their courage and capacity.- VON der GOLTZ.

Inseparable from strong will is self-confidence. In war these are better guarantees of success than is high intelligence. Self-confidence has the courage of its convictions, satisfied that they are practical and good, but unconcerned about their being the best possible. The self-confident mind is clouded with no doubt. Where higher intelligence might falter, self-confidence acts with promptitude, and decision, following Scharnhorst's maxim, that in war it matters not so much what is done, as that what is done is done with proper unity and strength.

With strong will and self-confidence should go willingness to bear responsibility. This is not a common quality, for human nature shrinks from blame; and often an apparent willingness is really ignorance or perfect understanding of the gravity of the burden assumed.

The courage of responsibility is a glorious and divine gift, which alone enables a high placed general to achieve great results; for, if his own experience and intelligence are not sufficient, he finds shrewd helpers to supply his deficiency. Courage of responsibility is born of a certain magnanimity which must be inherent in the general, and which nobles his whole nature. It is a feeling of superiority which elevates without making presumptuous. It is moral courage and strength of mind in high development, schooled to endure the severest trials without unsettlement of the power to reason clearly, and without swerving from the great end in view. Thorough knowledge enhances security, steels self-confidence, and so gives calmness under responsibility. Ignorance and uncertainty undermine it, destroying the power to act with decision under stress. --VON der GOLTZ

Leaders must be prepared to accept responsibility for the acts of the subordinates, an every-day affair in the naval profession. Distant separation and scant knowledge of local conditions on the part of the chief must often compel his giving wide discretion to subordinate commanders. A corollary to this is the necessity to judge rightly of men's limitations and capacity. Officers high and low must know their commands as a whole and their subordinates individually. To choose the right man is half the doing of the deed.

The will is supported by the desire to excel, to be first. Ambition has been disparaged as a purely selfish motive; but it is not necessarily selfish. Even if it were, it would still be a valuable military attribute, since it incites to continued, unflagging effort to succeed. "Great deeds are impossible without ambition." "Ambition the soldier's virtue."

Testing the will and endurance of a commander-in-chief, disaster, disappointment, the shortcomings or disaffection of subordinates, interference or lukewarm support from the government, all add severely to his burdens, to bear which he must have patience and resolution, found in the highest in such characters as Washington and Wellington. The ability to bear up unflinchingly under great misfortune is an invaluable quality in every leader. Nothing else contributes so much towards retrieval of a reverse. The powers of the leader truly great then work at their best, the brilliant supremacy of such resolution imparting double inspiration, as when Paul Jones, had "just begun to fight."

A well balanced imagination is a proper complement, as it is a natural development, of the knowledge in a mind well trained and stored; and, with imagination the memory should be good. Kitchener in his South African campaign, according to a staff officer, carried in his memory the movements, daily position, and orders of all his detachments, without other aid than a map unmarked in any way. This seems a needless extreme, yet it is plain that a strong and capacious memory and a clear imagination are of the greatest assistance, if, indeed, not indispensable, in grasping any situation swiftly and correctly. Napoleon forgot nothing and left out of sight no resource available to him. He attributes his so-called inspirations to memories. Imagination is a creative force which blends with will, ambition, and a love of fame to produce an irresistible activity. Like other impelling forces, the imagination must be under steady control, lest it stray off to scare up anxious apprehensions. In an ill-trained or ignorant mind imagination may be paralyzing to initiative. Consideration and sympathy are indispensable; but the superior leaders must not be weakly swayed by them, away from a well considered purpose. The fate of individuals must not undermine the cause.

Assuming the general preparation of a young officer has from the first inculcated right ideas of duty through constant association with officers of chosen character, his subaltern years in active service should develop the practical application of what has been taught, forming a second nature of attention, painstaking, thoroughness, promptness, cheerful alacrity, a genuine respect and deference towards superiors, a dignified, firm, and even-tempered attitude towards subordinates, and at all times alertness, self-possession, and readiness. In short these years mould the officer's character to its place in the organization, so that the flow of authority may find in him no obstacle, friction, or diversion. To be effective, this experience, which deals so largely with the human element, should be had in duties not too frequently changed. It is a period of habit formation, not of stocking with varied information. Thoroughness in one duty has far more value for character, hence for the officer's future worth, than an imperfect

knowledge of many duties. At the same time the spur of the un-achieved is the most wholesome incitement, and no young officer should linger in a duty full mastered. At this stage there is danger of the clever young officer's mistaking facility in his duty for mastery of his profession. The friendly attention of seniors will counteract this, if they take interest in his reading and in his conceptions of duty and responsibility. Only in this way can juniors be expected to gain a true appreciation of higher responsibilities and of the wide reach of the naval profession. At the same time they will perceive that they have become members of a distinct race of high traditions, which they are expected to know and fulfill.

The average officer whose military training has received due attention in the early years may be expected in the next stages to incline to serious study of military science. Some grasp of what it means to be responsible for the proper employment of military force will deepen his interest, and ambition will stir him to prepare for future leadership. This is the appropriate time for such higher instruction and direction in his professional reading as will promote studying logically and connectedly, to strengthen his military knowledge, at the same time steadying his mental process.

A bold seaman is a refreshing contemplation, and exemplifies a quality not enough cultivated; a noble ship of war in the hands of a timid seaman is a most unpleasant incongruity. Personal courage and professional boldness not unfrequently are combined. One is an affair of nerve simply, the other unites an operation of the mind. Both may, and should, be cultivated; but neither to the exclusion of the other. The cultivation of professional boldness consists mainly in the thoughtful experience of mature years, in positions of responsibility; and has but little relation to the column of "total sea service" paraded in the Navy Register, because of the thoughtlessness and youth in which much of the service is seen, and because of the variety of aptitudes which exist. Some will find lessons, and lay by their teachings, where others will discover none; and will discuss acts, even of their superiors, when knowledge can be derived- which practice, when conducted in a right spirit, far from being objectionable is highly praiseworthy; but when indulged censoriously is not only to be depreciated, but it positively execrable.- COMMANDER JAS. H. WARD, *Manual of Naval Tactics*, in the 60's.

The value of a large proportion of foreign cruising is too evident to mention, notwithstanding that for ten years past it has fallen into all but disuse. In stimulating the imagination and enriching one's knowledge of the world, in affording opportunities for comparison with other services and for acquaintance with persons, localities, languages, and customs, foreign cruising properly systematized, is the most broadening experience that could be devised. Experience of this kind must be had if officers, when they attain to command, are to make the utmost utility of their charges, either alone or when acting on the plan of a superior. The interior administration and the navigation of a ship are learned in the ordinary course of service. Though essential, they are secondary, or rather they are means, not the end itself. For training for higher command we must look outside the ship.

Officers trained in the manner here outlined may be counted upon, in the majority, to keep up their interest and to improve their capabilities. The transformation in the general attitude of the service, were such a system to be instituted, would be marvelous and there would be no decrease in technical efficiency.

On the contrary it would increase, because the truer military perception then become prevalent would not tolerate the subjection of military considerations to technical shortcomings, but would insist upon technical betterment. Witness the improvement in ordnance consequent upon target practice agitation. Moreover the greater thoroughness and attentiveness engendered would tend to decrease many of the material ills now suffered.

The ablest leaders and the best subordinates, as measured by the standards described, do not make an effective organization unless possessed of a sense of loyalty equally general and strong. It is loyalty not alone to the country, but to the organization, to the measures decided upon, to the leader, and to his plan. History is full of examples of well-conceived plans failing or neutralized through unsympathetic execution. On the other hand Nelson's brilliant initiative off St. Vincent is luminous of true loyalty.

That the four prime attributes engender ^{such} loyalty is clear from their analysis. Virtue means manly spirit and rectitude, both implying mutual confidence between principal and dependent; honor implies faithfulness to trust, even to punctiliousness; patriotism involves unselfish devotion, to the last extreme; and subordination is essentially intelligent cooperation. Thus in our ideal loyalty is inherent fourfold. Like the rods of steel in a concrete structure, the ties of loyalty reach in every direction to bind all together unshakable. Moreover, loyalty has creative force, and it is infectious of not only unifying and harmonizing influences but of stimulation to higher effort as well. Duty for duty's sake is no enduring appeal to the mass, but loyalty inspires all men with the sense of a living cause.

And who can estimate the strength which a commander-in-chief derives from the certainty of loyal support? The reverse is shown by a comment of the Comte de Paris on McClellan's Peninsula campaign.

This sluggishness is in a measure forced on the generals by the nature of their troops. These troops are brave, but the bonds of subordination are weak in the extreme. It follows then that there is no certainty that what has been commanded will be exactly executed. Hence come hesitation and conditions unfavorable to daring enterprise.

A favorite English writer of military studies, Colonel G.F.R. Henderson, says:

Without absolute obedience to the spirit as well as to the letter of the law; without a determination on the part of all to render loyal service and cordial support to every authority, however distasteful such a course may be; without the resolution to forego and to check criticism of the acts of superiors, skill and courage are of no avail.

Again, speaking of Wellington,

Throughout the whole of his career he had been the most obedient of subordinates. Loyalty to his superiors, whether statesmen or soldiers, was the first rule of his life. Whether he approved their action or not he invariably supported them, and he never permitted himself to criticize. That a soldier should criticize his superiors, either in public or in private, did not square with his ideal of an officer and a gentleman.

One can hardly conceive of any human organization prospering without a common sense of loyalty. When the will to discern the spirit of orders is lacking, obedience becomes paralyzing to progress and in that form is more insidious than insubordination.

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The loyal officers sees in every duty a trust demanding his best. To him an order's origin is personal only so far as the superior's character makes more clear the intent of the order. Thus loyalty begets mutual confidence, knitting the whole force closer, strengthening every element that makes for effective action- decision, daring intelligent comprehension, swift and certain execution.

The leader who is confident of his subordinates makes the most of all his opportunities by giving to them large powers of initiative. Of such a course, Henderson says, writing of the Franco-Prussian war:

.....The initiative of the subordinate leaders.....multiplies the strength of the army.....It is owing to this quality that, in the midst of varying events, the supreme command pursued its uninterrupted career of victory, and succeeded in controlling almost without a check, the intricate machinery of the most powerful army that the nineteenth century produced. In executing the orders of the supreme command, the subordinate leaders not only did over and over again more than was demanded of them, but surpassed the highest expectations of their superiors. It often happened that the faults, more or less inevitable, of the higher authorities, were repaired by their subordinates. In a word the Germans were indebted to the subordinate leaders that not a single favorable occasion throughout the whole campaign was allowed to escape unutilized.

The contrast of the French practice (changed since 1870) enhances the advantage of the German-

The faults and omissions of French subordinate leaders are to be attributed to the false conception of the rights and functions of command, to the ingrained habit of blind and inert obedience, based on a principle which allowed no exception, and acting as a law, absolute and immutable, in all degrees of the military hierarchy. To the virile energy of the Germans they could oppose nothing but impetuous courage. To the intelligent, hardy, and even at times somewhat reckless initiative of the German subordinate leaders, the French had nothing to oppose, in the grand as in the minor operations, but a deliberate inactivity, always awaiting on impulse from above..... Therein lies the true secret of German strength. Her foes of days to come will have to reckon seriously with this force almost elementary in its manipulation, and prepare themselves in time to meet it. No well organized army can afford to dispense with the initiative of the subordinate leaders, for it is the determining factor in war.

Whatever importance loyalty, cooperation/ and initiative may have in land warfare, on the sea they are vital to success. The seafaring profession breeds independence and resource in emergency; hence responsibility is readily accepted and instructions which go much in detail are wirksome. The problem is to transform independent action into taking the initiative cooperatively. The German army principle of training applies with all the greater force on the sea.

.....Our corps of officers are trained to spontaneous activity, to take the initiative, and to aim at positive success. Everything with us is action, Our strength lies in great decisions on the battlefield..... Initiative and independence play their greatest part when mobility is most active, and they will not permit of being inoculated into a person in a short time, but require the labor of years.

The capacity for rapid movement of modern navies, the wide area of the theatre of war, the variety of weapons, and forms of attack

and superiors are forbidden in the most stringent terms, to entrench upon the prerogatives of their subordinates. The third means is the enforcement of the strictest discipline and the development of camaraderie in the highest sense. Despite the latitude that is accorded him, absolute and punctual obedience to the most trifling "order" is exacted from the German officer; while devotion to duty and self-sacrifice, exalted to the same level as personal honor and inculcated as the loftiest sentiment by which the soldier can be inspired, are trusted to counteract the tendencies of personal ambition.

Our lack of system produced as a whole, not united effort for continuous modern progress, but wide diversity of opinion and methods with consequent reversals of procedure as authority passed from hand to hand. The inevitable result was a lowered military standard. This tolerates inferiority of material, which in turn lowers the conception of what may be accomplished by material, thus making the vicious circle complete. Much earnest endeavor has been devoted to improving our condition, but the action taken has not always been consistent nor progressive, nor fully appreciative of the demands that war and its preparation impose upon the individual in command. Much credit is due those who have exposed defects and pointed out a truer course; but individual and spasmodic effort is not enough. The whole service as well as the whole country, needs to be kept alive to the magnitude of the effort continuously necessary.

No navy has better potentiality among its officers and men than ours. Hence to be found wanting in war would be all the worse. Defeat by superiority of numbers is no disgrace, though the many notable instances of victory won by inferior numbers leave cold comfort in defeat of any kind; but avoidable defeat resulting through unpreparedness and the faulty employment of forces would indeed be hard to bear. The possibility of such humiliation can be averted only by indoctrinating the service with the principles of loyalty, initiative, and intelligent cooperation, and with the clear understanding that naval efficiency comes by cultivated growth, not by sudden creation.

That is not all to be done of course, as true naval efficiency depends as much upon the people and Congress as upon the service itself. Naval aspiration for adequate material is vain, unless the effort be backed by sustained, intelligent popular interest. Many are prone to lay all blame on Congress and the people for present conditions; but we must steadily ask the question-- Are we ourselves making the most of what we have? Neither Congress nor the people can train our characters to be military, nor is there any person or body outside the navy competent to speak with authority on naval matters. Particularly in our country is this so, since the navy no longer has the naturally sympathetic background which existed in our once powerful merchant marine. Yet, however much there may be failure outside to grasp the fact that only experts can give sound advice in a matter so highly specialized as the navy, it is out of place in a military service to seek consolation for any inferiority in placing the blame, however justly, elsewhere. Would defeat be any the less bitter? The bare thought of it is intolerable to military instinct. "General" said an officer riding hastily towards Stonewall Jackson at Bull Run, "the day is going against us!" "If you think so sir," was the quiet reply, "you had better not say anything about it."

Inferiority does not win victory. Nor do fewer numbers constitute inferiority. These truths our people and our service must take

to heart before we may count on success. For what it may have to do the navy must be consciously and positively superior to the force it may have to meet-- not necessarily greater, ship for ship and gun for gun; but in appropriate material, personnel, morale, and employment, as a whole superior. All sense of inferiority must give way to fixed confidence in success. We must recognize all that is needful to that end, and neglect or slight no part of it. Any test, every criticism, should be welcomed. Only incompetence and weakness seek cover. To root these out we must be honest with ourselves, else disunion and apathy will stifle regenerative forces. War accepts no excuse and offers no prize for second place.

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