

HIGHER EDUCATION AND THE PROFESSION OF ARMS: EXPLAINING THE LOGIC

by Bill Bentley and Bernd Horn



DND photo by Sergeant Charles Barber, J6 Imaging, Canadian Forces College

Canada's Chief of the Defence Staff, General Walter Natynczyk, addresses members of the JCSP course at CFC Toronto, 16 May 2012.

The question often arises among senior officers as to what is the requirement for higher, or more accurately, graduate education. Although few, if any, would deny the value of such an investment, the barrier is always time. For individuals who are exceptionally busy, the issue continues to be the trade-off between time *spent* on studies, and time *available* to clear the ever-present day-to-day workload. Many default to a position that time spent in an appointment or rank adequately prepares the individual for the challenges they encounter or will face in the future. So what exactly is the requirement for graduate education for senior officers?

There is no 'silver bullet' answer to the question; no quantifiable data that can categorically provide comprehensive proof. Rather, the response lies in the logic – the argument for the critical importance of education for senior officers in the profession of arms. The starting point stems from the great Prussian theorist Carl von Clausewitz. He clearly identified that: "If we pursue the demands that war makes on those who practice it we come to the realm of intellect."¹

Simply stated, all members of the profession of arms in Canada must possess a deep and comprehensive understanding of the necessity, if we profess to truly consider ourselves a

profession in Western society, to possess a deep understanding and comprehension of a relevant body of knowledge. More exactly, as Eliot Freidson, a leading scholar on the subject of professionalism identifies: "A profession has a formal program that produces the qualifying credentials, which is controlled by the profession and associated with higher education."²

And, there is good reason. The failure to abide by this tenet could have serious repercussions, as the institution discovered in the 1990s. By 1997, Doug Young, then- Minister of National Defence (MND), General Maurice Baril, the Chief of the Defence Staff (CDS), and the Louise Frechette, the Deputy Minister (DM), were all seriously concerned that the balance among the four pillars of professional development – training, education, experience, and self-development – had become distorted and very problematic. Missing was an emphasis upon education, particularly higher learning.³ The MND confirmed: "Without higher education you're not tuned into what's happening in the larger society." He concluded, "That's where we lost the ball."⁴

As a result, Young, supported by monographs written by four eminent Canadian scholars – Jack Granatstein, Desmond Morton, Albert Legault, and David Bercuson – oversaw the production of *The Defence Minister's Report to the Prime*

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*Minister on Leadership and Management in the Canadian Forces.*⁵ The center of gravity of this Report was the importance of higher education. Among the most important results were the stand-up of the Canadian Defence Academy, *Officership 2020*, *NCM Corps 2020*, the Canadian Military Journal, and the creation of the Applied Military Science Course and the National Security Studies Course at the Canadian Forces College (CFC). However, that was over a decade ago and these initiatives predate Canadian Forces (CF) involvement in Afghanistan, the Indian Ocean, and Libya. If anything, today's security environment is much more challenging, complex, and unpredictable than it was at the close of the 20th Century. Arguably, the need for higher education is even greater today.

But the logic or requirement for graduate education for senior officers goes beyond the failing of the past, due to a lack of higher education, or the more complex security environment. A second critical characteristic of any true profession is captured by scholar Andrew Abbott, another expert on the subject of professions. He observes: "In any profession practical skill grows out of an abstract system of knowledge, and control of the profession lies in control of the abstractions." Abbott further asserts: "This characteristic of abstraction is the one that best identifies the professions." He then explains: "Only a knowledge system governed by abstractions can redefine its problems and tasks, defend them against interlopers, and seize new problems."⁶ For the Canadian Profession of Arms, this abstract system of theory

based knowledge at the core of the profession is the General System of war and Conflict illustrated below:

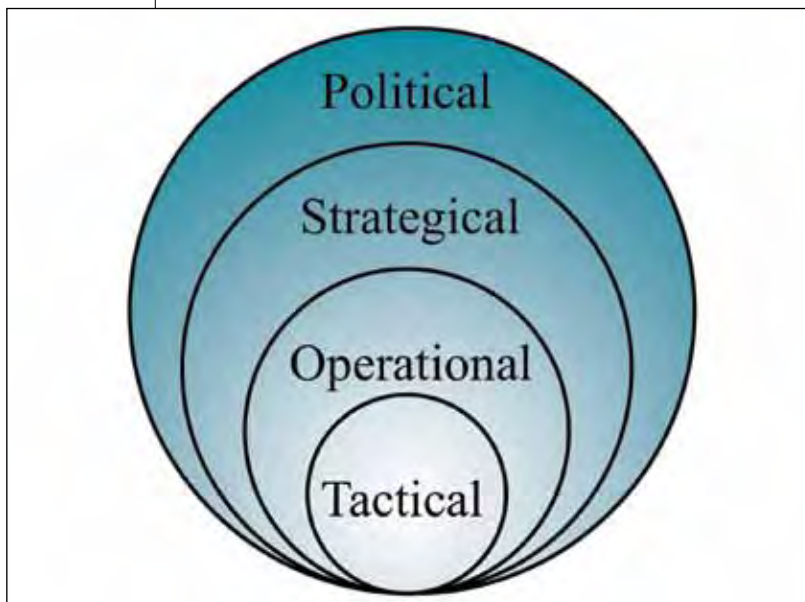


Figure 1. War as a Complex Adaptive System

This system must be understood as a complex adaptive system, as described in complexity science. The system becomes less linear and more complex as one ascends from the tactical to the politico-strategic level. Formal education becomes the mechanism that allows an individual to better comprehend and understand the integrated, multifaceted, intricate, and complex context of the military profession within the larger world in which it exists. It is critical to mastering the necessary body of knowledge.

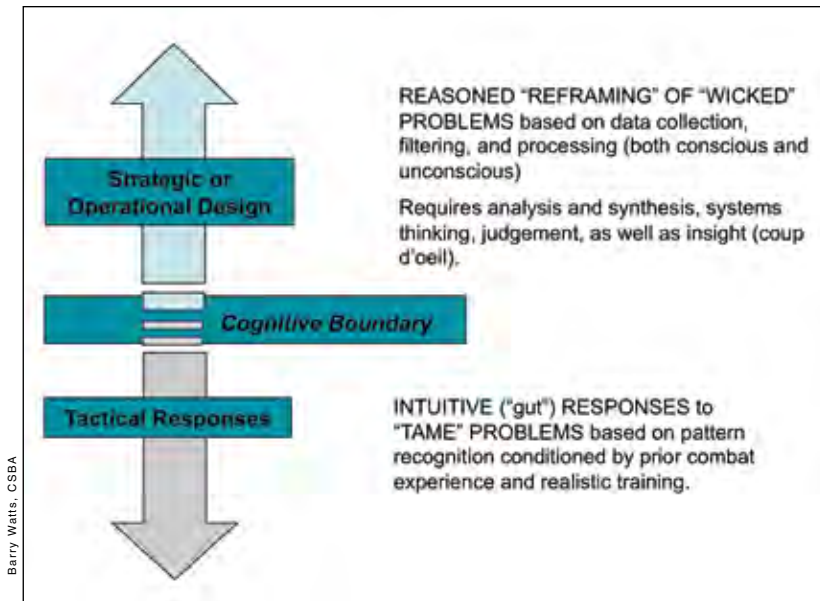
This requirement has long been understood by those studying the profession. Renowned strategist Colin S. Gray identifies a key abstraction within the realm wherein senior officers exist. He states: "Strategy is virtual behaviour, it has no material existence." Gray explains: "Strategy is an abstraction, though it is vastly more difficult to illustrate visually than are other vital abstractions like love and fear."⁷ Israeli strategist Shimon Naveh makes a similar, if more abstruse, point. He insists: "Military strategy evolves in a dynamic learning environment of praxis, which is a spatial reflection of the tensions between the ontological analysis of reality and the epistemological understanding of institutional knowledge, between conceptualization and application, theorizing and performance, institutionalization and change."⁸

Importantly, operational art, the playground of senior officers, is only slightly less abstract than strategy. Naveh asserts: "We can legitimately argue that the conceptualization of operational art transformed military science in a pattern resembling relativity and quantum mechanics."⁹ He notes: "The development of operational art as a neoteric field of knowledge provided for the first time in the history of modern military thought an intermediate environment for discourse, which bridges harmoniously over the traditional cognitive gap between the conventional fields of military knowledge."¹⁰



Deutsches Historisches Museum, Berlin

Carl von Clausewitz



Barry Watts, CSBA

Figure 2. Cognitive View of the Traditional Levels of War.

The central point is that officers, particularly general officers, require knowledge and understanding at a higher level once they leave the tactical level of operations and staff appointments. They need a wider and deeper understanding of human behaviour, politics, and the world around them, to mention just a few areas, in order to be able to operate effectively. Given this increasing complexity as one ascends the hierarchy in the General System of War and Conflict, higher education becomes a necessity. Military strategist Barry Watts underscores the requirement. He affirmed: “The cognitive skills exercised by combatants with tactical expertise differ fundamentally from those required of operational artists and competent strategists.”¹¹ In fact, Watts identified a cognitive boundary as illustrated:

In essence, the boundary is essentially between the tactical level and the operational level. Therefore, crossing this boundary and operating as operational artists and military strategists requires advanced education, specifically graduate level education. Gray drives this point home persuasively. He argues: “Because strategy is uniquely difficult among the levels of war and conflict few, indeed, are the people able to shine in the role of strategist.” He insists: “Their number can be increased by education though not by training, and not at all reliably by the experience of command and planning at warfare’s operational and tactical levels.”¹² Henry Yarger, yet another expert in the field, supports Gray’s thesis. He points out, “... [that] strategy remains the domain of the strong intellect, the life-long student and the dedicated professional.”¹³

In short, senior officers of all ranks can never stop studying and learning if they are to lead and act as stewards of the profession into the future. Moreover, the General System of War and Conflict discussed above always takes place in a real world, within a contemporary context that is ever changing and evolving. Importantly, this context is accessed, created, and understood through the study of conventional academic disciplines, such as Geo-Politics, International Relations, History,

Sociology, Anthropology, Economics, and Science and Technology. Given the nature of the abstract theory-based body of knowledge at the core of the profession of arms, the old paradigm that is based upon the concept that successful tactical command equals promotion must be rejected. The new paradigm for the 21st Century quite simply is – successful tactical command, plus higher education, equals promotion.

The respected American commander and war fighter, and the current Director of the US Central Intelligence Agency, General David Petraeus, confirmed the need of graduate level education for senior commanders. He believes: “Such experiences are critical to the development of the flexible, adaptable, creative thinkers who are so important to operations in places like Iraq and Afghanistan.” Moreover, he concluded that graduate studies “... provide a fair amount of general intellectual capital and often provides specific skills and knowledge on which an officer may draw during his or her career.” Importantly, General Petraeus insisted “... [that] graduate school inevitably helps U.S. military officers improve their critical thinking skills.”¹⁴ It is no different for Canadian officers.



Reuters/PTX&SBW

General David Petraeus

And so, a summary of the logic for higher education for CF officers can be itemized as follows:

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- All officers need an undergraduate degree.¹⁵
- All lieutenant-colonels and colonels employed at the operational or strategic levels need a graduate degree(s) from as wide a selection of universities as possible.
- All general officers / flag officers (GO/FO) require a graduate degree.
- A PhD is desirable (but not mandatory) for a GO/FO, but it should be acquired prior to promotion to Flag rank.
- All GO/FOs should be involved in a comprehensive program of secondments, seminars, two week courses, three, six and twelve month programs, fellowships, and so on. This program could be administered by the Canadian Defence Academy, but it must be directed by the CDS as the Head of the Profession of Arms in Canada.

The investment in graduate and post-graduate education in both time and resource is undisputedly high. However, the responsibility of senior officers to navigate the institution through an often ambiguous, perpetually changing, and always complex and dangerous world imposes the obligation on its stewards. After all, those who claim the title of professional, and who society has entrusted with the safety of the nation and the lives of its sons and daughters, are obliged to ensure they are as prepared as possible to provide advice to the government, and to lead the nation in harm's way.

Lieutenant-Colonel (ret'd) Bill Bentley, MSM, CD, PhD, is currently the Deputy Director of the Canadian Forces Leadership Institute at the Canadian Defence Academy in Kingston, Ontario.

Colonel Bernd Horn, OMM, MSM, CD, PhD, is the Chief of Staff Strategic Education and Training Programs at the Canadian Defence Academy. He is also an Adjunct Professor of History at the Royal Military College of Canada.



Syndicate discussions at CFC Toronto.

NOTES

1. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Eds.), (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), p. 135.
2. Eliot Freidson, *Professionalism* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 2001), p. 127.
3. Only 53.3 percent of officers had a Bachelor's degree and only 6.8 percent had graduate level education at the time.
4. Vice-Admiral Larry Murray, interview with Bill Bentley and Bernd Horn, 6 October 2010.
5. Douglas Young, MND, *Report to the Prime Minister on the Leadership and Management of the Canadian Armed Forces* (Ottawa: DND, 1997).
6. Andrew Abbott, *The System of Professions* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1988), p. 9.
7. Colin S. Gray, *The Strategy Bridge: Theory for Practice* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 61.
8. Shimon Naveh, "Discursive Command-Operators – Systemic Operational Design: A New Framework for Strategic Epistemology," p. 1. at <<http://home.no.net/tacops/taktikk/kadettarbeld/hovan.htm>>. Accessed 10 October 2011. See also Bill Bentley, *Professional Ideology and the Profession of Arms in Canada*, (Toronto: The Canadian Institute of Strategic Studies, 2005).
9. *Ibid.*, p. 2
10. *Ibid.*
11. Barry Watts, "US Combat Training, Operational Art and Strategic Competence," Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, Washington, D.C., 2008, p. 52.
12. Gray, p. 61.
13. Henry Yarger, *Strategic Theory for the 21st Century* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, 2006), p. 8.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 18.
15. This was mandated by the MND in 1997. However, see Bernd Horn, "A Rejection of the Need for Warrior Scholars?" in *Canadian Military Journal*, Vol. 11, No. 2, Spring 2011, pp. 48-53, for an explanation of why education is essential for officers.