

Sorry, Pentathlete Wasn't on the Syllabus

Crispin Burke

In the last few years, the Army has been promoting the “Pentathlete” model of leadership: a leader skilled in his or her tactical field of expertise, as well as skilled in all forms of military as well as diplomatic power. Indeed, it is a reflection of the change that is needed in our officer corps, changing our personnel system and our zeitgeist from an industrial-age model to an information-age model. Unfortunately, the Pentathlete is only getting lip service at the various captains' career courses in the Army.

I graduated from the Aviation Captains' Career Course in June of 2007. The focus of the modern captains' career courses has been on the Military Decision Making Process and Intelligence Preparation of the Battlefield. With rare exception, the exercises which hone officers' skills in these areas are focused on the conventional Fulda gap-style battle. During one such exercise, played out on the 1970s-era JANUS computer system, I was designated as an engineering officer, controlling vast arrays of land mines. Our enemy was the ubiquitous Red Horde, taken straight from the pages of a 1980s Army field manual on the “OPFOR”. The enemy had no reason for being, they were simply bad guys. Economics, political situations and cultural awareness were missing from the scenario. As the acting engineering officer, I asked questions about whether or not the fictional enemy was a signatory to international land mine treaties, and whether or not we had an information operations program in effect to prevent children from tampering with the mines. I got a lot of blank stares.

The battle was a classic attrition-style defense; a modern-day Maginot Line. Despite all that has been written about third-generation warfare (Blitzkrieg) and fourth-generation warfare (state vs. non-state), we operated largely in the second generation of warfare.

While studying MDMP and IPB, we spent hours tracing out friendly and enemy positions on acetate with Sharpie markers, even though computer-based mapping software such as Falcon View and the Command Post of the Future (CPOF) dominates the modern-day Tactical Operations Centers of our Army. The majority of the class, which consisted mostly of combat veterans, scratched their head in confusion—they had already been to combat, and knew that what they were being taught simply wasn't right.

Obviously, our junior officers are being placed in an unprecedented predicament—they have been amassing combat experience like no other generation since World War Two. Certainly, to

develop the new “Pentathlete” brand of Soldier, we will need a new education system and career path for our junior officers.

For starters, we must acknowledge that our junior officers have a level of tactical competence that far exceeds that of their predecessors for at least thirty years. Our education programs, therefore, must concentrate on sharing lessons learned, obviously, but they must also focus on the next step in our officers’ educational programs. Our captains must be schooled in strategic thought as well, specifically in the areas of manner of maneuver warfare, counterinsurgency, stability operations and disaster relief. Our officers must understand politics and economics, and should be encouraged to debate and challenge conventional Army viewpoints on these issues.

The Military Decision Making Process should be largely amended as well. Such a scientific, mechanical viewpoint of war may have its advantages in that it provides for a thorough planning process, but it also comes with significant drawbacks. Viewing the battlefield in terms of force ratios, mobility corridors and the like were practiced by the German High Command in 1914, during which German General Moltke’s meticulous plan fell apart as he failed to fully grasp the realities of swift Russian mobilization, as well as the insurgent tactics of the Belgians. Furthermore, the “systems analysis” approach to war, viewing war as a successful math equation won only with proper force ratios, was applied by Robert McNamara and his “whiz kids” to another insurgency—that in Vietnam---with disastrous results. Our officers need to view war as an art. As such, they should be exposed to ideas such as *Patterns of Conflict* in order to gain a much greater strategic view of the battlefield and America’s strategic situation.

Our junior leaders should be shown greater career options. Currently, the Aviation Captains’ Career Course only allows for information sessions for career fields in operations/command, special operations, experimental test pilot programs, and the Army’s Acquisition Corps, the latter of which has been often railed-upon by Secretary Robert Gates. In order to better grow leaders who are competent in dealing with foreign governments, complex insurgencies and successful in Fourth Generation War, we need to provide valuable information sessions regarding a broad range of career fields, most notably the Foreign Area Officer and Information Operations career fields, among others. The Foreign Area field, in particular, had a strong stigma attached to it, and many FAOs were subsequently cut from the military in the post-Cold War military, even as military deployments to various countries continued to increase.

As I say this, however, I should note that in its current personnel system, few aviation officers would choose to become foreign area officers or information operations specialists. As soon as an aviator declares one of these two vital career fields as a functional area, he cannot simply do a two year tour as a foreign area officer. He will be tracked as such for his entire career—aviators would never set foot in a cockpit again (much less receive the large flight pay incentives), nor would they ever command an aviation battalion if they declare something other than operations as a career field.

In order to properly grow a diverse set of skills needed by the 21st Century warrior, we must design a new career path, one that allows, and even mandates advanced schooling and a broad range of skill sets. We must allow our officers the time to obtain advanced degrees at places other than the University of Phoenix-Online, where they are encouraged to debate the aspects of

foreign or economic policy with classmates. We must also mandate that they acquire a broad skill set before commanding at higher levels, while still maintaining their tactical proficiency in their branch, particularly in the aviation branch, where a high degree of proficiency is required at higher levels of command.

And we need to do it quickly before more captains become increasingly more jaded and cynical towards the institutional Army while sitting through hours on end of PowerPoint slides regarding the difference between different variants of Soviet BMPs.

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