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What Caesar Told His Centurions: Lessons of Classical Leadership and Discipline for a Post-modern Military

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Over the past year, senior leaders in both the Marine Corps and the Army have criticized the discipline of the American military. In the Commandant's "Heritage Tour" and in similar comments made by senior officials in the Army one hears a constant refrain that the American military is losing its warrior ethos and its professionalism.[1] A similar dissatisfaction is felt by many officers and staff NCOs with the quality of the human components of the military – witness a recent survey by the Army that only 25 percent of its officers and enlisted feel it to be going in the right direction, with poor discipline and a lack of confidence in senior leadership being cited as leading factors for the low morale.[2] The Marine Corps has long claimed that such problems are the province of the Army; the Marine Corps ethos has always been based at least partly on the notion that Marines are innately better than everyone else, are made and disciplined in a way entirely different from the other services and are held to much higher standards. But discipline problems can no longer be denied by either service: since the 1990s, but particularly since the surge in Iraq, there have been increasing concerns that the human material America is offering its military is too weak, and that the system of training and discipline now in place have caused our standards to decline precipitously.

This is a problem that has been faced by others before us. What I offer here is a historical perspective to our current problems and a few lessons learnt over centuries of campaigning by the Roman Army. Although far removed from us by space and time, their concerns were the same as ours. Like us, the Romans were preoccupied with protecting their borders from alien cultures, and like us, chose to fight those battles as far away from their doorstep as they could, largely by using their organizational and technological expertise to prosecute conventional wars against an unconventional enemy. In their estimation, they faced an apparent decline in the human capacity of their countrymen to wage war. Like us, the Romans of the last century BCE looked to a recent past - perhaps a half century prior - as being a golden age, and saw in their own era the decay of virtues and martial strength. They worried about the declining quality of the men who entered military service and were dismayed by the corrupting influences of what they knew as "modernity". Beyond these broad similarities, if Clausewitz was correct that the principles of war do not change over time but are immutable, then perhaps too the principles of military leadership are also immutable, or at least analogous. Thus the pillars of classical leadership still have their application today. It is leaders who decide what will be disciplined and how disciplined will be administered and thus determine the values and virtues that will be expressed in any organization.

Whether we survive as an institution and remain an effective fighting force may depend upon our willingness to reaffirm the military virtues that were familiar to the Romans as well as to the Marines of just a few generations ago, but which we, and America, have now largely forgotten.

The First Pillar: Personal Discipline

We love phrases like "be the example and set it." Although in practice it is easy to dismiss the importance of behaving correctly both on and off duty, the experiences of two millennia back its importance: "The conduct of officers is always determined by the behavior of their generals; it depends on that whether they adopt the simple life or indulge their taste for riotous living; this again determines whether the troops are smart or disorderly."[3] We take our cues on how to behave and how not to behave from those with more power than us, both because we want to emulate those we respect but also because it gives us an idea of how much we can get away with. Although in our era we tend to narrow the concept of "setting the example" to simply avoiding trouble, the Roman conception would have been much broader and would have encapsulated a host of conceptions about what constituted military virtues and how one expressed them in daily living. Gaius Marius is described by Plutarch as living a life that was "rude and unrefined, yet temperate, and conformable to the ancient Roman severity" making him "more comfortable with the discipline of the camp than of the city."[4] For such men, dressing in polo shirts on liberty would not have qualified as setting the example, rather, living frugally, "banishing luxuries on every hand,"[5] and embracing hardship and pain with calmness would have been the essence of military virtue.

Pillar Two: Focus Your Control

The question was asked by a different military, "Do you command your section? or are you merely in it? Have you got that grip? If you have not you are merely a rather unreliable means of transmitting orders which you are incapable of enforcing."[6] The nexus of discipline, leadership and punishment is a complicated and unfortunately understudied subject, but we can settle with Tacitus' judgment that soldiers of all times and places are "men who cannot endure the extremes either of bondage or of freedom." Determining how much and what kinds of freedoms to allow is a key to efficient organizations of all kinds. Julius Ceasar answered this conundrum by paying attention only to those attributes that directly contributed to one's usefulness on the field of battle, and mostly only when threats were near:

> He never valued a soldier for his moral conduct or his means, but for his courage only; and treated his troops with a mixture of severity and indulgence; for he did not always keep a strict hand over them, but only when the enemy was near. Then indeed he was so strict a disciplinarian, that he would give no notice of a march or a battle until the moment of action, in order that the troops might hold themselves in readiness for any sudden movement; and he would frequently draw them out of the camp without any necessity for it, especially in rainy weather, and upon holy-days. Sometimes, giving them orders not to lose sight of him, he would suddenly depart by day or by night, and lengthen the marches in order to tire them out, as they followed him at a distance.[7]

Whether we call Marines "professionals" or "warriors", our efforts to control their behavior should focus on how they behave in the field and in combat rather than what they do in their free time. If they are professionals, their identity as Marines only exists while on duty; if warriors, then it is probably true that they will fight "nothing the worse for being well oiled."[8] As Kipling put it, "Single men in barracks don't grow into plaster saints": Marines rebel against discipline when they feel it to be either unnecessary or unrelated to their real purpose, which is to fight. For this reason, we should not equate discipline and the ability to perform under fire with dainty behavior on liberty or "polished buttons, erect carriage and

things of that kind... [as they] are not the cause but effect" [9] of internal discipline. Discipline should be tough, but if it is not grounded in purpose, it will never be self-enforced.

Pillar Three: Communicating Virtues Through Punishment

Over recent decades, the range of military punishments available and the level at which they can be assigned has narrowed considerably. The weightiest punishments will generally be administered at a level so far removed from where they occurred that by the time the guilty party is actually punished our collective attention will have drifted away. Thus there is little practical element of collective dissuasion in brig time and discharges. And the punishments available to company-grade officers, those most intimately connected with maintaining the "good order and discipline" of the services, are generally so watered-down or so intimately tied to bureaucratic processes as to be almost meaningless for correcting behavior – in fact, the amount of paper work any punishment or corrective action requires makes it almost more painful for the punisher than the offender. And although the paperwork may be useful in a long campaign to end someone's career or prevent their promotion, such punishments are much less useful for immediately correcting the behavior of individuals and units.

Nonetheless, junior officers and staff NCOs can shape individual and collective behavior through mild punishments and extra military instruction. Punishments must be swiftly administered and tied directly to the deficiency at hand. Attention should be focused on those things which directly and obviously influence combat effectiveness. Polybius recounts that the Roman Army primarily punished soldiers for two types of transgressions, "crimes" and "unmanly acts." Crimes included activities like falling asleep at post or, for officers and NCOs, failing to catch one's subordinates if they fell asleep at post. Such offenses were punished by being stoned or beaten to death. The second category consisted of those things which were considered "unmanly acts and disgraceful in a soldier" such as desertion in battle or losing one's weapon in the field, which were punished with death or flogging.[10] At the commander's discretion, this category could be taken to the extreme: the general Corbulo had a man executed simply for putting his sword down while digging a trench.[11] Entire units could be punished as well. Units that broke in battle were decimated: lots were drawn and every tenth soldier was beaten to death by his comrades. In another example, the legions that survived being defeated by Hannibal at Cannae were punished by exile to Sicily where they lived in tents for the years until Scipio took them to Africa where they redeemed themselves at Zama. Although these punishments were harsh, they were all tied directly to combat performance. Thus, they served a well-defined military purpose and because of that there was good reason for the rank and file to "buy into" the disciplinary system.

Pillar Four: Make Rewards Meaningful

There must be very few people left who have not heard the term "positive reinforcement." Rewards are an important aid in maintaining unit effectiveness and morale. But do we reward well? Does being granted extra liberty for winning a PT event increase combat effectiveness? And does giving a decorative piece of paper to someone in front of a battalion or regiment reinforce military virtues? Maybe not. Historically, winning a competition would have been reward enough in and of itself, perhaps with some trinket added into the bargain. We cheapen the activity and weaken our competitive spirit by offering external incentives for good performance. And we are so inundated with meaningless awards that generally the only person concerned with an awards ceremony is the recipient, which suggests that we are not inspiring the general population to emulate whatever trait we are rewarding. In the vast majority of ceremonies, the watchers, from generals on down, are bored, uncomfortable, and doing their best to not pay attention to what is going on.

Until recently, most armies offered rewards that combined intrinsic value with public praise, making them

both more tangible and more meaningful than what is offered today. For example, the Romans rewarded the first soldier over the walls of an enemy city with the *corona muralis*, a crown made of gold. Other awards might be given in the form of torques or bracelets of (somewhat) precious metals. These rewards were presented to the recipient in front of the whole army and when worn with one's uniform were considered very impressive to soldiers and civilians alike.

> …the recipients of such gifts, quite apart from becoming famous in the army and famous too for the time at their homes, are especially distinguished in religious processions after their return, as no one is allowed to wear decorations except those on whom these honours for bravery have been conferred by the consul; and in their houses they hand up the spoils they won in the most conspicuous places, looking upon them as tokens and evidences of their valour. Considering all this attention given to the matter of punishments and rewards in the army and the importance attached to both, no wonder that the wars in which the Romans engage end so successfully and brilliantly. [12]

Just like their punishments, the Romans would not have seen the point of rewarding anything that did not occur in battle. Thus, awards were tied to combat performance and martial values and had considerable effect in spurring the efforts of soldiers in battle.

Pillar Five: Discipline By Example

It is very easy once one advances beyond the rank of Corporal or Sergeant to find oneself becoming tied to the concept of "managing" or "inspecting" work and to stop participating in it. How often have we seen PFCs and Lance Corporals filling sandbags or picking up trash or doing rehearsals while a handful of staff NCOs and officers watch them from the sidelines? An easy habit to fall into, and because it is one that does not necessarily prevent one from accomplishing the mission, equally easy to dismiss one's idleness by saying, "Well, that's not my job. I exist for other purposes." But Plutarch says of Marius that he gained popularity with his soldiers by

> "matching the[m] in labor and abstemiousness... as indeed any voluntary partaking with people in their labor is felt as an easing of that labor, as it seems to take away the constraint and necessity of it....For they [the soldiers] do not so much admire those that confer honors and riches upon them, as those that partake of the same labor and danger with themselves; but love them better that will vouchsafe to join in their work than those that encourage their idleness."[13]

Partaking in physical labor, however menial the task, does serve a purpose, for it offers a commonality of experience and reinforces the bond between those working and those most intimately responsible for them. For this reason, the emperor Hadrian could often be seen marching with his army in full kit for as much as twenty miles.[14] Many successful leaders intuitively emulate this practice, hence the innumerable photos we see of politicians with their shirt sleeves rolled up in order to look workmanlike, or the pictures of generals in clean uniforms addressing dirty, exhausted Marines coming back from a fight or from a training exercise. These images have their place in mass communication, of course, but for those who share a closer bond with the rank and file nothing but real sweat will suffice.

Parthian Shots

You might wonder why I chose to draw lessons solely from the Romans rather than the Spartans, who we

so like to compare ourselves to. Certainly, *300* and *Gates of Fire* have made the Spartans seem accessible and their courage is undoubted. However, both our military and our society at large do not bear a close cultural resemblance with Sparta, nor did the Spartans have a military system that we would want to emulate. Their concept of "command authority" was derived from a complicated politico-religious foundation that would be impossible to replicate. On the battlefield, this meant they often relied on what we would consider superstition to give them moral courage. At the battle of Nemea, for example, after maneuvering their forces into position for a charge, the Spartans paused less than 200m from their enemy in order to sacrifice a goat before committing themselves to action.[15] Fortunately for the Spartans, their superiority over the other Greeks in small unit maneuvers was a saving grace in many mismanaged battles.

Hans Delbruck said of the eventual Roman triumph over the Greeks, "All the differences between the Greek and Roman military systems can be traced back to the difference in discipline."[16] It was this discipline that allowed the Romans with first a citizen army, and then a professional army, to secure the borders of a new nation and to expand them to the farthest reaches of the known world. And it was the decline of that discipline that marked the fall of the Empire, being both a symptom and a cause of it. The wealth, the infrastructure and the technology of Rome meant nothing in the face of foreign invaders when the organization and composition of their military was beyond repair. Roman discipline was built upon a belief in the virtues of austerity and frugality, the dignity of labor and an acceptance of hardship – but tempered by a willingness to acknowledge the basic humanity of soldiers and not to castigate them for sins they committed away from the battlefield. These beliefs would have been familiar to Americans of two or three generations ago, but that is no longer the case. Our ability to remain an effective fighting force may depend upon on our willingness to accept those virtues once again and America's willingness to allow us to act in accordance with those beliefs.

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[1] See for example Jim Michaels, "Marine Corps Chief Addresses Lapses in the Ranks," in *USA Today* 4 June 2012, Andrew Tilghman "Officials Troubled Over Behavior of US Troops" in *Army Times* 3 May 2012, Michelle Tan, "Soldiers Seek Return to Traditions, Discipline" in *Army Times* 3 April 2012

[2] Bryan Bender, "Army morale declines in survey" in *The Boston Globe*, 19 August 2012 .

[3] Tacitus, *Histories*, W.H. Fyfe trans., p. 89

[4] Plutarch, *Lives*, J. Langhorne and W. Langhorne trans, Vol I, p. 513

[5] *Historia Augusta*, Hadrian, 10.4

[6] An Open Letter to a Very Young Officer (Journal of the Royal United Services Institution, Vol. LXII., February to November, 1917 available online at **http://regimentalrogue.com/srsub/openletter.htm**

[7] Suetonius, *The Lives of the Twelve Caesars*, A. Thompson and E. Forester trans., Vol I, LXV.

[8] Suetonius, *The Lives of the Twelve Caesars*, Vol I, LXVII.

[9] Lord Moran, *The Anatomy of Courage*. New York: Carroll and Graf, 2007. p. 182

[10] Polybius, *Histories*, p. 250.

[11] Pat Southern, *The Roman Army: A Social and Institutional History*. Oxford: ABC-CLIO, 2006. p. 146

[12] Polybius, *Histories*, p.250

[13] Plutarch, *Lives*, p.515

[14] *Historia Augusta*, Hadrian, 10.4

[15] Xenopohon, *Hellenica*, H.G. Dakyns trans., 4.2

[16] Hans Delbruck, *History of the Art of War Within the Framework of Political History*. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1975. p. 286-88

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