

An Interview with Sean Parkes: The Logic of Good Soldiering

Samuel Cox (SC): Can you give me the BLUF (bottom line up front) of *Good Soldiering*?

Sean Parkes (SP): *Good Soldiering* promotes an enduring culture of optimal performance: as individuals, as teams and as an Army. It is about building a high-performance organisational culture to win the ‘contest of wills’ that is war. Think of [Stanley McCrystal’s Team of Teams](#) approach. The Australian Army has done this well over time, but the 21st Century combat team needs an open architecture approach: one that can quickly integrate new team members from well outside Army, including from joint, academic, industry and other partners, to deliver effects at short notice.

Good Soldiering is about setting teams up for success on the future battlefield and reinforcing Army as a trusted national institution. In the past, *Good Soldiering* meant ‘don’t do bad stuff’. It was focused upon behaviour and the organisation had a degree of ‘cultural reform fatigue’. But culture is bigger than just behaviour. It encompasses attitudes, values, beliefs, and symbology. We’re now linking culture to capability. Optimising culture can realise extra potential and performance; it is why companies and sporting teams focus on their culture to develop a competitive edge.

Good Soldiering isn’t hard to understand; it doesn’t need a 28-page TASKORD. The [Chief of Army](#) expects us to apply mission command, so you need to do your mission analysis. Ask yourself, “how does that apply in the context of my team?” and “am I getting after the 16 ‘teaming behaviours’ that are the heart of *Good Soldiering*?” Show a bias for action.

It’s simple: do you want to be on a winning (high performance) team on the future battlefield? If so, then you need to recognise that culture is incredibly important. *Good Soldiering* is Army being proactive on its culture because, just as you can’t surge trust, you can’t surge an optimal culture. It takes time and deliberate effort.

SC: Does the current 2-3 year posting cycle enable cultural development to be supported and progressed, or does change only lead to uncertainty and confusion?

SP: We need to be comfortable with change. Army’s teams will have to aggregate and disaggregate really quickly, particularly on the future battlefield. We need to judge our people based on their capability to achieve that. That willingness to team quickly will actually work well with the posting cycle as people will understand they need to build relationships and trust really quickly in order to deliver on a team mission or task.

Wherever you go, you take culture with you. The *Good Soldiering* tenets, strength of character, the Army values and the 16 ‘teaming behaviours’, should be carried into every role and with every new team.

SC: What is meant by ‘followership’?

SP: A good follower brings a high level of individual readiness, professionalism, fitness, health, and mental wellbeing to the team. A lot of people in our Army don’t understand this is one of their responsibilities to their chain of command. There is an interdependence between achieving good leadership through good followership.

Alongside accountability, mission command, and simplifying the Army, followership is one of the key messages.

We strive to develop excellent leadership, but where do we develop followership? That’s actually a huge part of what we do when we’re supporting our boss and our chain of command. We need to shift our mindset and hold ourselves accountable as professional followers. A section, for example, is more than a Corporal; we need to understand how every member contributes and drives that team. This is not just a leadership responsibility; everyone has agency and should not just rely upon the leader.

Retired General Stanley McChrystal [a former U.S. commander of the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan] talks about flattening hierarchical structures in favour of shared consciousness and de-centralised responsibility held at the junior level. But that only works with professional followership. Our Army hasn’t mastered this yet, but democratising responsibility to trusted followers (which is true mission command) is one of the ways we’ll continue to punch above our weight to achieve exponential effects and outcomes.

SC: You’ve been in the Army for a long time now. What ideas are you seeing nowadays that are entirely new?

SP: We’re empowering the junior part of the organisation now; especially through professional military education (PME). Take *The Cove* for example: it provides an opportunity for junior officers and soldiers to contribute to capability and strategy. That’s a paradigm shift from the old way of doing things.

Further, we’re on the precipice of huge technological change- artificial intelligence, [human-machine teaming](#) (HUM-T), big data and the like- that’s going to be revolutionary for Army. What does that mean? Well, we’re a middle power army so it’s one way we might punch above our weight against peer adversaries.

SC: What do you think is the most important issue facing Army right now?

SP: The fight for talent. A middle power army punches above its weight when it accumulates talent. We are competing to recruit from a limited national resource pool of people who can serve in the current Army. With talent you can do pretty much anything, so having the best workforce possible, teamed with technology, with the right culture, for the size of the army we’ve got, is key. Culture is a key recruiting and retention mechanism. Everyone wants to be part of a winning team. A great service with a great culture becomes an employer of choice.

SC: Do we need to transform what our current workforce looks like moving forward?

SP: Definitely. We're still a hierarchical organisation, as most military forces are, but we need to have agility in our Human Resources to harness the talent and specialisation within our workforce. Stanley McChrystal talks to this very well. Traditional industrial age models don't fit well to our hyperconnected digital world where things are speeding up (*Accelerated Warfare*). The slow method of seeking approval by going up-and-down a chain of command isn't going to be agile enough. This brings us back to mission command. An organisation only makes good decisions with good information flow and shared context. If you get this right, the organisation naturally self corrects through good context and understanding. If you do not get this right, people can go off on tangents.

If we want a learning and adaptive organisation that attracts talent, we need to change our old hierarchical model. Senior leaders now need a mechanism to speak directly to the junior part of the workforce. That's where Vlogs might come into it. That's a platform to deliver commander's intent without it having to filter down a pipeline. That's a big change and there's a degree of discomfort in asking a military organisation to do that.

SC: In what role or from what person did you learn the most about leadership?

SP: There isn't one particular person, but many good team builders who demonstrated:

1. Ethics;
2. EQ [emotional quotient/intelligence];
3. Systems thinking; and
4. Cognitive agility.

I've seen leaders with combinations of those traits, and a good strategic leader has all four. As a start point, EQ and humility are fantastic qualities. It is also a proven formula. *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap... and Others Don't* by James C. Collins found that really great CEO's partner competence with humility. You often see that in our senior leaders, and they tend to generate a fantastic team environment.

A 'systems thinker' recognises the interconnectedness of the world. The operational construct 'Multi-Domain Operations' seeks to converge effects in land, sea, air, space and cyber, and Army has a good value proposition to lead that convergence. The Chief of Army talks about 'joint integrators', but I'd take it another step forward and talk about 'multi-domain integrators'. Army's value proposition is that we deliver effects onto land and the human domain, and we can lead the convergence of effects across all other domains. To achieve that, we need systems thinkers with cognitive agility.

SC: Does the Australian Army use the construct of 'multi-domain operations', or is that a construct the United States' military uses?

SP: It is starting to permeate our narrative. The U.S. is trying to codify it in doctrine - as an extension of the 'Air-Land Battle' - but for us it is a useful operational construct about how we might fight in the future. It's going to be a significant cognitive shift for Army as we're

still quite land focused. We need to be more joint, that is more effectively understand our joint partner capabilities to converge domain effects, and we're playing catchup in the information warfare space which is better recognised under multi-domain operations (particularly the cyber domain).

SC: What is the relevance of Army as we move forward in an environment where political warfare can corrosively erode our defences below the threshold of conflict?

SP: We provide a 'persistent presence' in the human domain; we're not temporal like a ship or plane that comes in-and-out. Information warfare is cognitive; it seeks to have an affect on humans and their minds. Army operates in the human domain and through persistent presence. As a service, Army has the best opportunity to achieve access, understanding and influence, particularly in our near region.

SC: Do you think the Australian public has the appetite for the Army to be a persistent presence in another country after the long wars in Iraq and Afghanistan?

SP: We need to broaden our understanding of the form and function of being a 'presence'. This isn't defined by a large-scale footprint; this is a tailored presence in specific parts of the world to deliver influence, particularly through scalable teams. Our military attachés are our forward defence to achieve access, understanding and influence; and we can exercise more regularly with our neighbours which builds trust and understanding.

SC: How do we develop and foster a contemporary culture of professional contributory dissent? Rather than junior leaders holding back out of fear that they'll be found to be insubordinate or seen as undermining the team.

SP: 'Contributory dissent' is a bad term; I prefer the Chief of Army's words: 'contest of ideas'. People need the psychological safety to contest ideas, and we need diversity and inclusion to underpin this. By virtue of our national culture, we're more comfortable with professional conflict than many other military organisations around the world. However, we're still missing out on a lot of the goodness in the junior part of the organisation by not empowering them to 'contest ideas' and realise new possibilities as much as we should.

However, the 'contest of ideas' is something we should only take to a certain point; a way to get to the right idea or to deliver the right capability. At the end of the day we're still a military where leaders will be required to make decisions (often despite the 'contest of ideas') and where subordinates will need to execute in accordance with intent. That's reflective of a military profession.

Colonel Sean Parkes has had a range of command and staff appointments in Army and the Army Joint Staff, and an industry outplacement with General Motors Holden. He has commanded at all ranks, including Unit and Task Group, and with multiple operational service tours in East Timor, Iraq and Afghanistan. He has been awarded the Distinguished Service Cross, Distinguished Service Medal and a Commendation for Distinguished Service. He is currently serving as the Director of Workforce Strategy in Army Headquarters.

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