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A SOLDIER'S EDUCATION: PREPARING FOR THE "UNFORGIVING MINUTE"

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In the era of the "strategic corporal," the importance of junior commanders has increased because of the greater responsibilities they now shoulder. The memoirs of a young American officer offers insights on how junior officers can be better prepared for their complex jobs.

CRAIG A. Mullaney, a West Point graduate, former Rhodes Scholar, 2003 Afghan War veteran and presently a Director in the Pentagon, published his memoirs early last year. Critically-acclaimed by senior officers like General David Petraus, Mullaney was not a recently-retired, high ranking career officer, but a far younger thirty-one year old who was on active duty for only eight years. Despite his relative youth and brevity of military service, Mullaney's memoirs, entitled *The Unforgiving Minute: A Soldier's Education*, contains valuable insights.

In the era of the "strategic corporal," the importance of junior commanders has increased because of the greater responsibilities they now shoulder. The Singapore Armed Force (SAF) can benefit from Mullaney's insights on how its junior officers should be prepared for their own unforgiving minutes they will surely face.

The Soldier-Scholar in the 21st Century

Mullaney stressed the varied approach in his military education prepared him for the challenges he faced in discharging his duties as platoon leader. His academic education and military training came together to equip him with the requisite skills not only to do his job as a military commander well, but to also help him understand who he was professionally, as well as the position of responsibility he occupied.

Mullaney earned his commission and undergraduate degree at the U.S. Military Academy. Having received a unique mix of academic and military training, Mullaney graduated from West Point as a

soldier-scholar in the truest sense of the word; he not only successfully completed the elite U.S. Ranger course, but was also awarded a Rhodes Scholarship to study at Oxford.

Singapore does not have a military academy like West Point. All SAF officers, both full-time National Servicemen (NSF) and regulars, earn their commissions at the Officer Cadet School (OCS), SAFTI Military Institute. With full-time National Service (NS) only two years long, the course is compressed into 38 weeks to ensure NSF officers have sufficient leadership experience in that period. With only limited time, OCS naturally focuses on the practical aspects of being an officer. For regulars who qualify for university, they can be temporarily released from military service. Military and academic training are not mixed, but often happen as a sequence, usually with OCS first, followed by university.

This arrangement trains excellent “technician-officers” who can work with mechanical efficiency. It is, however, problematic. First, splitting military and academic training runs the risk of emphasising one over the other. Both are equally important. The professional soldier should be more than a mere technician, a member of a larger international fraternity who understands both its practicalities (the nuts and bolts), as well as its larger philosophical questions (“What does it mean to be a soldier?”). Above all, soldiering this century requires knowledge that cuts across numerous boundaries, from strategy to religion, politics to culture. Practical skills alone will not suffice. More than ever, soldiers must now know how to “think,” and not just “do”. Only analytical training augmented by broad, academic knowledge that the social sciences and humanities provide can prepare a soldier for such challenges.

The Learning Organisation

In the late 1990s, the SAF was revamped to be a “Learning Organisation”. But such efforts focused on methodological approaches to learning, or “how” to learn, rather than substantive knowledge acquisition, or “what” to learn. The SAF has also broadened its training to include academic elements that have social science and humanities components. The new Undergraduate Professional Military Education Programme is one such example. More, however, can certainly be done.

Through a balanced mix of military and academic training, West Point made Mullaney into the consummate professional soldier. It did not just train him for a “job”. As Mullaney became increasingly proficient in soldiering, he began asking more philosophical questions about his profession, often during intimate discussions with West Point faculty, themselves often serving or ex-officers. Mullaney therefore did not just become a technician proficient in killing other people, but also a philosopher who understood the nature and impact of his craft. West Point did not just train Mullaney; it made him into an officer.

Educating Soldier-Scholars in the SAF

The comparatively small number of SAF regular officers precludes the establishment of a degree-conferring military academy in Singapore. A programme modelled after the American Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC), however, may provide a similarly holistic education within existing training structures and arrangements.

In the ROTC, which is available at many American colleges, officer cadets are matriculated as regular students, but have other military obligations such as training or particular course electives to fulfil. It is also customary for officer cadets to don their uniforms once week, a reminder of their professional identity. Officer cadets therefore receive both military and academic training simultaneously.

With the Undergraduate Professional Military Education (PME) Programme, SAF officers in local universities also now have to take military-relevant electives. Hopefully, the variety and number of such electives will grow. They, however, only actively undergo military training during their long school vacations. Such arrangements result in a military identity that is often only adopted during the long vacations. This transition between the “military” and “civilian” worlds can be abrupt, and is

unnecessary. A ROTC-styled programme would ensure continuity and balance in the officer's university experience.

As the role of the military becomes increasingly complex, and command becomes increasingly decentralised, the SAF needs to put additional effort into ensuring its young officers are not just technicians, but professional soldiers who are well-equipped for the intellectual challenges they now face. A holistic military education will give them the confidence to do well under such pressure.

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