

Innovative Leadership – A Case Study of Tal Afar and Implications for the SAF

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Abstract:

The significance of adaptive leadership in the military has never been more important, with wars in Iraq and Afghanistan heralding the rise of asymmetric warfare and proving the tenacity and adaptability of insurgents and Taliban alike. As modern battlefields get increasingly uncertain, complex and competitive, future military leaders must develop innovative leadership; not just an ability to adapt but also to learn faster, understand better and adapt quicker than their enemies. This form of leadership, developed in the “crucible” of Iraq, is clearly one that not only requires the ability to react to change, but also the creativity to arrive at original solutions to similarly novel and complex challenges on the battlefield.

Keywords: Generation Y; Innovative Leadership; Modern Warfare; Military Planning

INTRODUCTION

Much ink has been used in the continuing discourse on the importance of military leadership. Even more blood has been spilled proving it. Indeed, the significance of adaptive leadership in the military in particular has never been more important, with wars in Iraq and Afghanistan heralding the rise of asymmetric warfare and proving the tenacity and adaptability of insurgents and Taliban alike. As the Army Leader Development Strategy of the United States (US) indicates unequivocally, the future battlefields will be “even more uncertain, complex and competitive as hybrid threats challenge us across the full spectrum of operations.”¹ This requires future military leaders to not only be adaptive, but also to “learn faster, understand better, and adapt more rapidly” than their enemies.²

During the war in Iraq, the experience of full-spectrum operations that ranged from conventional military assaults to civilian reconstruction helped shape innovative traits in many officers. According to Dr. Leonard Wong, a researcher in the US military, Operation Iraqi Freedom served as a “serendipitous crucible experience” that gave many leaders, in particular junior officers, the opportunity to acquire

“adaptive capacity.”³ As Wong stated after citing multiple interviews with officers, while leaders were “always accustomed to sudden change,” the environment in Iraq was still vastly different. Wong attributed this to a higher impact of “unpredictability,” which in turn forced officers to literally “anticipate change at any moment.”⁴ American officers in Iraq found that on top of anticipating change, they had to “rely on their own judgment and ingenuity” to create solutions and achieve mission success in the highly unpredictable environment.⁵

This form of leadership that was developed in the “crucible” of Iraq was clearly one that not only required the ability to react to changes, but also the creativity to arrive at original solutions to similarly novel and complex challenges on the battlefield. Thus, unlike “adaptive leadership,” which merely calls for the refinement of one’s approach to changing circumstances, the “innovative leadership” described in this article requires greater ingenuity and resourcefulness in conceiving new solutions to multifaceted problems. Extrapolating from Stephen Rosen’s definition of military innovation, an innovative leader must not only be one who can adapt to changing circumstances on the battlefield, but also more importantly, introduce “a new way

of war,” involving *new* operational procedures” and “changes in critical tasks” if necessary.⁶ This requires such leaders to possess a high degree of discernment in understanding and accepting the risks involved in the alteration of standard operating procedures to a set of untested and untried routines during wartime, and having the courage to carry them out.

It is apparent that innovative leadership is not only uncommon but also difficult to cultivate by virtue of its quality, and undeniable challenges still exist in nurturing and engaging the above traits in military leaders today.⁷ Yet, the case study examined in this paper reveals the necessity of such leadership during wartime. By examining the specific profile of an individual commander whose innovative leadership influenced the outcome of the war in Iraq, this article aims to show how such leadership can and should be exercised on the battlefield, and the pivotal role that it plays. Furthermore, given the sheer importance of innovative leadership to the battlefield as seen in the case study, this article argues that not only should such leadership be nurtured and engaged in the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF), but also more importantly, that the SAF is actually well-placed to do so given the influx of Generation Y soldiers entering service.

INNOVATIVE LEADERSHIP IN TAL AFAR

During the war in Iraq, the US was forced to completely overhaul their strategic approach to the war when it became apparent that the level of violence was worsening. The pivotal event that led to this conclusion was the bombing of the Shiite al-Askari mosque in February 2006, which led in turn to greater carnage as Shia militia struck back at Sunni perpetrators aided by Al-Qaeda in Iraq.⁸ This pessimistic but accurate assessment of the war was cemented when the Iraq Study Group, a ten member bipartisan panel commissioned by President Bush, grimly concluded that the circumstances in Iraq were “grave and deteriorating,” further recommending

that the US should begin pulling out by the first quarter of 2008.⁹ The increasing bloodshed not only highlighted the failure of the long-stated “light footprint” strategy that advocated “force protection,” but also paved the way for a change in strategy in Iraq. The concept and execution of a new strategy in Iraq was not the result of an arbitrary course of action by the military establishment and the Bush Administration, but the result of a long and deliberate process involving both civilian and military elements.¹⁰ The culmination of this process

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was the conception and execution of the surge in 2007. While the surge resulted in a significant increase in troops, it advocated the implementation of a new strategy—“clear, hold, build.” This strategy was to prove instrumental in decreasing the overall level of violence in Iraq

over the next few years, achieving success where the “light footprint” strategy had not.

The roots of the surge strategy can be traced to the city of Tal Afar, and the novel tactics of the then-Colonel H. R. McMaster. While McMaster cannot be considered a junior leader, his experience in the city of Tal Afar in 2005 is representative of the myriad innovative solutions that junior leaders conceived during the war in Iraq. His original approach in the city of Tal Afar would lead directly to the concept and execution of “clear-hold-build” as part of the surge strategy, ultimately resulting in a dramatic turnaround of the dire situation in Iraq. Furthermore, *FM 3-24*, the new manual on counterinsurgency created in 2006, advocated “clear-hold-build” as one of its recommended counterinsurgency approaches, while recommending less force protection in an affirmation of McMaster’s tactics.¹¹ Thus, McMaster’s innovative leadership not only resulted in the implementation of an overall strategic approach that effectively turned the tide of the war in favor of the US, but also established a new counterinsurgency doctrine for the US Army and Marine Corps.

Colonel McMaster exemplified innovative leadership in two ways. First, he recognized the disconnect between the counterinsurgency strategy adopted by Coalition forces and the desired result of decreasing violence. He was arguably the first commander in Iraq to utilize an approach that essentially contradicted the sanctioned “light footprint” strategy. While on hindsight the latter was a failed strategy that represented the unsuccessful attempts of Coalition forces to decrease the level of violence in Iraq, the concept was a valid one that had its roots in the famous counterinsurgency tenet attributed to T. E. Lawrence. The statement, that it was “better they do it imperfectly with their own hands than you do it perfectly with your own,” was often cited by General George Casey as the fundamental reason for adopting a posture of force protection and letting the Iraqis take charge.¹² Deviating from this original plan required strong and sound discernment. Second, upon recognising the ineffectiveness of the “light footprint” strategy, McMaster acted on his own observations to create a completely new tactical approach of “clear, hold, build” for his area of operations. This decision called for incisive judgment and ingenuity, and importantly, the courage to implement it in the battlefield.

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McMaster’s tactics were completely different from the sanctioned “light footprint” approach. Instead of utilising indiscriminate and overwhelming force, he used a slow and deliberate approach to cut off and destroy the insurgents. He prevented Tal Afar from being infiltrated by external influences by using his soldiers as a border patrol, thereby removing the threat of insurgent supplies and reinforcements from

Syria. Then, he eliminated safe havens for insurgents on the outskirts of Tal Afar, setting up patrol bases for Iraqi forces in their place. McMaster also recognised the importance of Iraqi tribal politics, and duly reached out to the outlying tribes as he cleared the outskirts of Tal Afar in a bid to win their favor. As mentioned, this was perhaps the first time such tactics had been employed in Iraq, especially compared to the indiscriminate demolition of Fallujah just the previous November. As a result of McMaster’s deliberate approach to weed out insurgents, most civilians within the city had already left for a camp prepared for them in order to minimize civilian casualties. As better intelligence came in after the initial attack, coalition troops were able to conduct precise offensive operations to capture and kill insurgents.¹³

Once major combat operations had ceased, McMaster chose to send his troops out into the city to “hold” it and secure the population, instead of following standard procedure of pulling out to Forward Operating Bases (FOBs). He implemented a new tactic of setting up thirty combat outposts manned by both US and Iraqi troops that gave them an unobstructed view of major roads. This discouraged the planting of Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) by insurgents, and the well-linked outposts gave McMaster the ability to respond quickly and unpredictably to insurgent attacks.

Interestingly, even before being deployed to Tal Afar, McMaster had trained his troops differently from other outfits, choosing to build cultural sensitivity as part of their preparations. He ordered his soldiers to treat their prisoners professionally, banning the use of the derogatory term “haji” among his men. He also ensured that at least 10 percent of his soldiers learned conversational Arabic in preparation for close interaction with the Iraqis.¹⁴ This was to prove useful in the third phase of McMaster’s operations, which involved the rebuilding of infrastructure and the reestablishment of public services, in a bid to gain the people’s trust. In the same vein, McMaster’s 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment was the only unit to have



US M1A2 Abrams main battle tanks patrolling the streets of Tal Afar

a feedback system polling detainees to find out how well they were treated. In a bid to set the city on a path to reconciliation, McMaster apologized to Sunni tribal leaders with ties to the insurgency for the ways US forces had erred previously.¹⁵ This was in stark contrast with the brutal tactics adopted by some outfits, including the 4th Infantry Division, which not only conducted mass, indiscriminate detentions but routinely conducted brutal abuse of detainees.¹⁶ These indiscriminate detentions not only failed to produce significant gains in the capture of anti-coalition forces or in the seizure of illegal weapons, but also fueled resentment among the humiliated Iraqis and ironically resulted in the creation of more insurgents.¹⁷

Thus, McMaster's innovative leadership played a pivotal role from the beginning of the campaign in Tal Afar to its end. His approach towards training was completely original. Having observed prior tactics adopted by US forces and their negative results, he chose an original approach of imbuing his men with a willingness to listen and have respect for the

Iraqis instead. Instead of adopting tried and tested tactics that worked efficiently in driving out insurgents from cities, McMaster adopted a slower, more effective approach. He recognised that the problem of the entrenched insurgency was actually rooted in the "light footprint" strategy that moved coalition forces out of towns and cities they had secured, leaving the same areas vulnerable to returning insurgents. McMaster therefore created a new concept of "combat outposts" that allowed him to maintain a 24/7 presence in Tal Afar, preventing the re-entry of insurgents and gaining the trust of the civilian population by using the same troops to aid in reconstruction. This was a huge risk because it exposed coalition troops and left them more vulnerable without the protection of FOBs. Finally, McMaster recognised the importance of reconciliation, choosing to see beyond the fact that individual Sunni and Shiite tribes were engaging and inflicting casualties on American soldiers and reaching out to them. On top of the "clear, hold, build" approach, the new tactic of establishing tribal relationships

would also be incorporated into the surge strategy of 2007, and would play an important role in Ramadi province.

McMaster would eventually hand over Tal Afar to then-Colonel Sean MacFarland and the 1st Brigade Combat Team from the 1st Armored Division. This gave MacFarland the opportunity to observe firsthand McMaster's innovative leadership and tactical approach. When MacFarland and his men redeployed to Ramadi Province in late 2006, he not only applied the "clear, hold, build" approach that he had observed to be so effective, but he also expanded reconciliatory efforts after experiencing what McMaster had done previously in Tal Afar.¹⁸ MacFarland's efforts at distinguishing between "reconcilable" and "irreconcilable" insurgents were to profoundly impact the mental models of General David Petraeus and his deputy, General Raymond Odierno. When they visited Ramadi in late 2006 just prior to taking over command in Iraq, both would discover valuable lessons to apply as part of the surge strategy. Odierno would later build on MacFarland's tactics in Ramadi, especially his decision to stay in the city with "a significant amount of force" instead of pulling back to FOBs, while Petraeus would learn that a key mechanism to secure the population was to identify and separate "irreconcilables" from the population.¹⁹ Thus, the innovative leadership that McMaster displayed was to have profound ramifications not only for other areas such as Ramadi, but also for the war in Iraq as a whole. The most significant element of innovative leadership seen here is that McMaster inspired other leaders to expand on his original approach, multiplying the positive effects of his tactics.

McMaster's experience was not unique. As mentioned, many junior leaders underwent trials that required them to adapt and create new approaches to their respective battlefield situations. General David Petraeus himself noted that many of the successes in Iraq could be attributed to "leaders—especially young leaders—who have risen to the occasion," demonstrating "enormous initiative, innovativeness, determination and courage."²⁰ The innovative spirit among the junior officer corps is best exemplified by the initiative of platoon leaders

and company commanders in creating the online web forums *platoonleader.army.mil* and *companycommand.army.mil*. These websites were popular forums that served as repositories of knowledge and experience among the junior officer corps. Many of the novel and creative small-scale solutions that individual platoon and company commanders derived were disseminated through similar mediums during the Iraq War.²¹ Like the impact that McMaster's tactics in Tal Afar had at the larger strategic level, these online mediums were used in "closing the gap between the institutional army and the operational army." This was done by giving "doctrine writers" access to the online mediums and opportunities to connect directly with the junior commanders by embedding in their units.²² From the above, we can see that innovation is frequently driven from the bottom-up, because junior commanders on the ground often have insightful perspectives gleaned from their experiences.

INNOVATIVE LEADERSHIP IN THE SAF AND GENERATION Y

Having established the paramount importance of innovative leadership on the battlefield at all levels, how do we then translate the lessons learned by the US in Iraq to the context of the SAF? It is my belief that the SAF is in fact well-positioned to further cultivate innovative leadership and culture with the influx of Generation Y soldiers in its ranks—junior leaders who have the ability to bring the culture of creativity and innovation into battlefield situations. Generation Y has indeed been noted to possess innovative traits, qualities vital in a commander on the modern day battlefield. Yet, much has also been said about the apparent inability of Generation Y soldiers to follow orders without questioning them, as well as their lack of tolerance for general regimentation and discipline. Discipline, conformity and regimentation are elements of any professional armed forces that are as indispensable as innovativeness and creativity in the battlefield, but may oftentimes seem to contradict each other. Are these mutually exclusive or can they complement each other to produce a formidable SAF that is relevant, ready and decisive?

Competencies	Core Competencies (For Leader Performance)				Meta-Competency (For Growth/Adaptability)
Skills	Conceptual Thinking	Social	Mission	Developmental	Self
	Critical Thinking	Communicating to Influence	Planning	Developing People	Self Awareness
	Creative Thinking	Interpersonal Effectiveness	Decision Making	Developing Team	Self Management
	Ethical Reasoning		Execution	Improving Organisation	Personal Mastery

Table 1: Reproduced from *POINTER Monograph No.4, Spirit and System, Leadership Development for a Third Generation SAF*

I would suggest that the current Leadership Competency Model (LCM) used by the SAF validates Generation Y as a cohort of leaders who are imbued with the necessary leadership qualities to aid in the important task of renewing the SAF as an organisation. As shown above, I find that the qualities of an ideal SAF leader as espoused by the SAF are reflective of many of the traits of Generation Y soldiers.

The SAF LCM consists of five competency domains. Four are considered “core competencies” that directly affect leadership performance, and there is a fifth “meta-competency” that is required for leader adaptability and growth.²³ Under the umbrella of the “Conceptual Thinking Competency,” an ideal leader in the SAF has the cognitive capacity that “solves problems and responds to challenges with innovative solutions,” using “past experiences, information from non-traditional fields and non-linear thinking to generate fresh perspectives and imaginative ways to succeed.”²⁴ In particular, the skills of critical thinking and creative thinking motivate the ideal SAF leader to envision a future state, think “creatively ... to construct the *new* reality” and “bring about breakthrough.”²⁵ Similarly, “Mission Competency” requires adapting plans when necessary, leveraging “technology, knowledge and previous experiences in planning.”²⁶ When combined with “Social Competency,” such a leader will be able to gain “support for ideas and initiatives,” thereby influencing others around them.²⁷ The ideal SAF leader is able to provide an important catalyst for renewal and change within the organisation by harnessing the capacities of individuals in his team, a crucial

part of the “Developmental Competency.” Last but not least, such a leader must “possess a dynamic capacity for self-awareness and self-management,” an ability that requires constant personal feedback from others around him or her.²⁸

When comparing the desired traits of a SAF leader with that of generally accepted characteristics of a Generation Y soldier, it is clear that there are few, if any differences. First, Generation Y soldiers are seen as “techno-savvy.”²⁹ Leveraging on technology along the way would therefore be a welcome prospect. Second, Generation Y soldiers prefer an environment that values their “innovation and creativity,”³⁰ especially one that has a “flatter” hierarchy that focuses on constructing “new realities.” This can only be a boon to an organization that constantly seeks positive renewal and change. Third, Generation Y soldiers desire constant feedback.³¹ Far from being disdainful of authority and having a misplaced conviction of their own abilities, they do in fact welcome constant appraisal of their performance not only from their peers but also from their elders or superiors.³² Thus, Generation Y soldiers do in fact possess many of the traits that make up an ideal SAF leader as advocated by the LCM.

The SAF LCM is subscribed to by all SAF leaders, whether Generation X or Y. The question is, why are Generation Y soldiers perceived as a challenge rather than a boon by their Generation X superiors? I find that the biggest factor is most likely the preference of Generation Y for flatter hierarchies. As soldiers, this may translate into the constant questioning of

instructions that often rankles older commanders. This seeming inability to follow orders without question appears to present a disciplinary issue that may have serious ramifications on the battlefield.

I present two challenges to this mindset. First, this particular trait of Generation Y soldiers does not necessarily have to translate to a blatant challenge of authority, and can instead lead us to question old paradigms and mental models to promote organisational learning.³³ As seen from the case study of Tal Afar, today's battlefields are such that we can no longer analyse doctrine, strategy and tactics with the luxury of time and space. Untested changes that will be the fulcrum on which victory and defeat rest must be made on the battlefield. Chris Argyris and Donald Schön, two prominent organisational theorists, attribute organisational learning to "double-loop learning," which only occurs with the modification of organisational norms and with the creation of "new strategies of performance."³⁴ This can only happen when mental models are *questioned* and revised. However, for this to happen, commanders must adopt a different mindset towards Generation Y and understand the basis for their questions rather than assuming the worst. Commanders must create such opportunities for their subordinates to do so without fear of being seen as a malcontent.

Second, discipline in the armed forces and innovativeness are not mutually exclusive. Discipline in the SAF is defined as the "obedience of orders, and the timely and accurate execution of assigned tasks." Discipline means that as professional soldiers, we do what we have to despite the difficulties and challenges involved, and to the "best of our abilities." The "perseverance," "inner strength," and "physical toughness" needed to be disciplined soldiers are in fact the qualities that the SAF develops in its soldiers through rigorous training.³⁵ This does not contradict the development or expression of innovativeness.

The SAF must recognise the opportunity that Generation Y presents. These soldiers embody many of the qualities set out in the LCM, and can help the SAF cement itself as the 3G force that we envision ourselves to be. Rather than incorrectly viewing Generation Y as one incapable of following orders, we must recognise the huge potential that lies in their creativity and innovativeness. Given the importance

of innovative leadership in the battlefields of today and of the foreseeable future, we cannot afford to permit disillusionment and discontent to fester within the ranks of our junior leaders and soldiers, allowing their abilities to be lost to the organisation. The hard lessons learned by the

US in Iraq over the period of several years and at the cost of thousands of lives constitute a price that the SAF cannot afford to pay given our manpower and geographical constraints.

Thus, while most literature today speaks of changing organizations to meet the needs of the new generation, it is imperative that leaders in the SAF modify their mindsets towards Generation Y soldiers to meet *our* own needs for the future. Instead of unrealistically expecting Generation Y servicemen to conform to our expectations of unquestioning obedience, we must recognize their qualities and adapt to them—or fail to do so to our own detriment. 🌐

However, for this to happen, commanders must adopt a different mindset towards Generation Y and understand the basis for their questions rather than assuming the worst.

ENDNOTES

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