Selecting and Maintaining The Aim Against The Odds

GORAZDE 1995

By Lieutenant Colonel Richard Westley MC & Craig Preston



GORAZDE MAY 1995

When times are tough and all does not go according to plan, leadership skills are fully challenged and tested. This article brings, to a more public arena, access to situations thankfully not usually found within a business environment, from which considerable insight and perspective can be drawn.

INTRODUCTION BY CRAIG PRESTON

We have all, from time to time, listened to speakers on leadership talk about their successes and experiences within a commercial environment. We also spend time attending development programmes where we are introduced to leadership theories and models which may be of use to us in our various management roles. Rarely, however, do we get the chance to listen to a leader's experience of inspiring others, when the chips are down, morale is low, and the odds are against us. It is during these times of change and uncertainty, when things are not going as we had planned that we find our own leadership skills being genuinely tested.

Lieutenant Colonel Richard Westley MC, the Commanding Officer of the First Battalion, The Worcestershire and Sherwood Foresters Regiment, spoke recently at a Criticaleye Forum. The messages from his talk resonated with all who were present. Here is the written version in his words. While it is a powerful story in its own right, the key leadership messages, summarised at the end of the article, are worth considerable reflection.

LIEUTENANT COLONEL RICHARD WESTLEY MC

The Situation

The Eastern Bosnian town of Gorazde sits astride the River Drina and was, in early 1995, completely surrounded by Bosnian Serb Army elements intent on its capture. Misnamed a 'Safe Area', Gorazde received a small UN force of 350 British peacekeepers to police a 12-month Cessation of Hostilities Agreement (COHA) which was due to end in April, but which was already creaking under increased pressure from the Bosnian Serbs. The UN was facing its own crisis; seemingly impotent in dealing with non-compliance from all of the warring factions, it was being pushed around and perceived as weak.

The town was totally surrounded by high ground, strategically important and badly damaged. The largely Muslim population of the town numbered 11,000, some of whom were refugees from neighbouring districts. They were poorly equipped but tenacious and competent street-fighters. The Serbs, however, were plentifully supplied with weapons and heavy artillery, and had 20,000 troops surrounding the town. A three-kilometre Total Exclusion Zone (or TEZ) had been established, in which no overt carriage of weapons was allowed.

I was a 31-year-old Company Commander of one hundred of those British soldiers in Gorazde. We had trained hard for six months in the UK and Canada on our war-fighting skills. This was a different approach to many European forces, who concentrated on Peace Keeping. Adherence to the British training policy (train for the worst case) played a critical part, as the tour progressed. We believed absolutely in General Sir Mike Rose's assertion that "if you want to be a good peacekeeper, first be a good war-fighter".

THE MISSION AND 'MISSION COMMAND'

The British Army ascribes to a philosophy known as 'Mission Command'. This means subordinates should be told **what** to do, **why** it must be done and **when** but not **how** to do it. Its aim is to empower commanders at all levels, constrain their thoughts and actions as little as possible, and thus not stifle enterprise and initiative. A mission comprises a task or number of tasks (The What) and a unifying purpose, or "in order to..." (The Why). The Commander, having framed mission statements for his subordinates, then gives a 'Statement of Intent' (his vision) and designates a key activity or 'Main Effort', resourcing it appropriately so as to concentrate force and effort.

We were not given a mission! We were simply told go to Gorazde, and so we set about framing our own mission. This, I believe, is the key responsibility of the leader. We were given some guidance by the overall Force Commander who said that we should do what we could to "safeguard the civil population of Gorazde as far as is practicable in a war". From this 'Statement of Intent' we devised a series of achievable tasks and



GORAZDE MAY 1995



WAR-FIGHTING TRAINING IN CANADA – AUGUST 1994

Tasks within the mission changed a number of times, as the situation changed locally and regionally, but the Purpose, the unifying reason 'why', did not. Selection and maintenance of the overall aim was key

bound them together with a unifying purpose that we believed reflected his intent. This was our first stab at a mission statement.

In order to assist in the protection of the civilian community and the continuation of UN operations, the Gorazde Force was to:

- Maintain the Gorazde 'Safe Area'
- Maintain the Gorazde TEZ for as long as consent lasts
- Maintain the safety of UN personnel and Accredited Agencies and the security of installations
- Observe and report Warring Faction activity
- Assist all Humanitarian Agencies and projects.

The mission was disseminated verbally and in written form so that subordinate commanders could analyse it and ask questions. I gave out specified tasks within these orders. I designated the Main Effort as the security of the three-kilometre TEZ. It is worthy of note that the tasks within the mission changed a number of times, as the situation changed locally and regionally, but the Purpose, the unifying reason 'why', did not. Selection and maintenance of the overall aim was key.

CONCEPT OF OPERATIONS

Our key premise was to act according to the principles of peacekeeping , fight if attacked and plan for contingencies. The maintenance of security in the Safe Area and particularly the three-kilometre TEZ was paramount. It was achieved by interpositioning Observation Posts (OPs) and Check Points (CPs) between the two sides, and reporting on their compliance with the Cease Fire.

We patrolled vast areas, which was gruelling and demanded great reserves of fitness and endurance - a vindication of our 'train hard-fight easy' maxim. We built the OPs to withstand fierce fighting as best we could. We conducted daily liaison meetings with both sides to monitor their activities and to try to convince them that the fragile peace was worth keeping. When we needed to be firm, we were. We had tense stand-offs and had to coerce violators of the TEZ to hand over any illegally held weapons not easy when these had been their means of survival during four years of fighting.

This activity sapped the courage of the young and experienced alike, and often resulted in combat. Each day, young soldiers had to undergo these confrontations. This has an effect over six months. As one soldier said to me, "Sir, six months is a long time to remain scared, when every day you wake up and think - will today be my last?" We



UN OP – GORAZDE – APRIL 1995



BRITISH SOLDIER WOUNDED IN A MINEFIELD – GORAZDE – APRIL 1995

As one soldier said to me, "Sir, six months is a long time to remain scared, when every day you wake up and think - will today be my last?"

also reported on our progress to the UN. There were no media present in Gorazde; the Serbs would not allow it, so we were the World's eyes and ears. As per our mission statement, we provided security for the UN, Médecins Sans Frontières and other NGOs in the town. Finally we had to escort Humanitarian Aid convoys to the outlying districts, to both sides. This was extremely hazardous, and often led to fierce combat, as one side claimed we were favouring the other. All this was aimed at meeting our main aim or unifying purpose, as mentioned above. It was the most dangerous place in which I had ever served and the second most dangerous town I have been to in 22 years of service. Both sides were hastening their preparations for the fighting season (May traditionally, when the harsh Bosnian winter abates), and we frequently had soldiers wounded in firefights, as a result of artillery bombardment or liberally laid mine fields.

We were always in close proximity to, and often had to deal with, Serb soldiers (often drunk) shooting at civilians in the town. They were often just metres outside the TEZ and 20 metres from us. According to the UN mandate, we were not allowed to prevent them, as they were outside the TEZ and not shooting at us. This presented us with moral dilemmas which I felt we could not and would not tolerate. We had to out-think the Serbs and work around highly prescriptive Rules of Engagement. When we could, we engaged them fiercely and some were killed. We derived no pleasure or pride from this, as we were ostensibly there to keep the peace. However, our overriding purpose was to protect the civil community, and we could not just be pushed around.

Of course we were vulnerable, isolated and could get no supplies in or out of the town, as the Serbs attempted to thwart our operations, and their stranglehold on our resupply chain increased. UN Escort Duties dried up, so we were unable to continue with Task 5, supporting the Humanitarian Agencies. We therefore put that task on hold,



THE SERBS UNLEASHED A FEARSOME ASSAULT ON GORAZDE – 28 MAY 1995

concentrated on the others and maintained our overriding purpose. I relied on mission command. I tried to empower my young officers and NCOs by encouraging them to think and act around problems, in order to meet the overall intent and the spirit of why we were there. In training I had encouraged them to be bold and decisive; "go now with a 75% solution, rather than wait for the gold-plated answer in two hours" was the mantra. I had also urged them to try things out, promising them that, if it went wrong for them and therefore for me, I would not refer to their mistakes in their appraisals or reports (make mistakes in training not on operations). Fortunately for me, my boss was of the same ilk and it bred enterprise, calculated risk-taking and trust.

As the noose tightened around Gorazde, I knew that things were coming to a head. We were proactive in our contingency planning. We increased our own protection against artillery fire, redesigned a less vulnerable resupply route via Greater Serbia, rehearsed plans in the event of either side starting fighting again, and planned furiously for our own extraction from the enclave. Our contingency planning was validated against the opposition's most likely and worst course of action. The Serbs' worst and most likely courses of action were the same; an all-out attack on Gorazde.

On 28 May 1995 the Serbs unleashed a fearsome assault on Gorazde. We fought them for five and a half hours against odds of 10:1, whilst the Muslims prepared to mobilise their defensive forces. Our OPs took a dreadful battering, as wave upon wave of Serb attacks were beaten back. The peacekeeping was well and truly over, and our war-fighting training and teamwork began to pay dividends. The Muslim forces relieved us in our OPs, when we could hold out no longer. My men held up over 600 Serbs until the Muslims got a few hundred into position, but it was a close-run thing. The OPs had gone, as had another task. We could not guarantee the security of UN-accredited agencies, as we had withdrawn into our camp in the town. We could not maintain the TEZ, although we could maintain the overall "Safe Area", as we could call in air strikes, if the UN would authorise them for a "Peace Keeping" mission. We could observe from our camp and tell the World about the Serb attack. Technically, we could achieve the unifying purpose (just), and so we cracked on.

We endured 30 days of artillery bombardment, which, at its height, saw 500 shells a day in-coming. We reported this, but the information was hidden for fear of bringing down the UN. The men stayed under cover, only coming out at night to exercise and wash. Getting around was vital for me; the men craved information and needed to see me. I tried to tell them what was happening in the bigger picture, that the fighting would have an outcome, and that we would have to deal with the winner. In short, we had to survive and get on with whatever was left of the mission. My commanding officer also needed some support. He was under great pressure, receiving telephone calls from the PM, facing both total failure



THE OBSERVATION POSTS TOOK A BATTERING – 28 MAY 1995

We conducted daily liaison meetings with both sides to monitor their activities and to try to convince them that the fragile peace was worth keeping

and the unknown, and so it was essential for me to shore him up by getting around, despite the shelling. We also needed to convince the local Muslims that they were doing well, and I went into the town each night to see them and offer solidarity.

However, end the fighting did. The Serbs reconstituted their forces and went for Srebrenica, where a battalion of Dutch Peace Keepers were based. Their doctrine was different to ours, and so were surprised and tricked by Mladic's Serb troops. They were rolled up quickly, and 7,000 Bosniac Muslim men were led away and executed, a terrible price to pay for not training for the worst case.

In Gorazde, we were able to re-introduce some of the tasks in the mission statement.

The Muslims controlled the TEZ and were better manned to occupy the area than us. However, we maintained the rest of the Safe Area, protected the agencies and even started to get some resupply convoys into Gorazde. The unifying purpose was intact.

We left at the beginning of September 1995, just as the Dayton Peace Accord was signed, the Serbs having been bombed into submission by NATO. Our extraction is another story. We had managed 70 aid convoys into Gorazde, 8,000 tonnes of Humanitarian Aid. Not a lot. We had fought over 60 protracted combat incidents. Ten of my soldiers were wounded. We had killed two Muslim aggressors and over 100 Serb soldiers. We were not proud of it. 30 soldiers had been taken hostage; all were returned safely though physically and mentally abused. We had endured artillery shelling on a scale not experienced by any British unit since Korea, and we had existed on one third of rations for three months. That said, the nightmare for the people of Gorazde was over. No more would they send their trademark Christmas card showing a refugee child next to the body of his dead father, with the words "Christmas Greetings from Gorazde, where only the dead are lucky".



'WORTH IT'. BRITISH SOLDIERS PATROL THE HILLS ABOVE GORAZDE – AUGUST 1995

In training I had encouraged them to be bold and decisive: "go now with a 75% solution, rather than wait for the gold-plated answer in two hours" was the mantra

CONCLUSION

We had achieved our mission, albeit at times by the skin of our teeth. What do I believe was important in this achievement? What were the 'Golden Threads'?

- We had deduced a clear strategic aim and we framed our own mission statement and our subordinates' missions
- Our commitment to selecting and training our team was vindicated
- Passage of information, even when we were under real pressure, was critical in fuelling the motivation of a high performance team
- By empowering junior commanders, I was able to command the battle and other operations. They trusted me and I them.

Gorazde did not fall. We did not have to live with another Srebrenica. We all came back, which I still find miraculous to this day, and not one of my soldiers has ever said "it wasn't worth it."

CRAIG PRESTON SUMMARISES

Leadership Lessons

So, what are the transferable leadership lessons? Colonel Westley has already drawn a number of conclusions, but I offer these key points to consider.

- **Selection and Maintenance of the Aim.** Irrespective of the context, the need to have a clear, unambiguous goal, which all can understand and align activity towards, is vital. It is the role of the leader, in the absence of being given a clear objective from above, to frame one themselves in order that their own people have a common unifying purpose
- **Mission Command.** The military term for true empowerment. Making sure that your people have aligned objectives and understand their freedoms and constraints. Then, crucially, giving them their head. They decide how to achieve the task and have permission to take risks
- **Prepare for the worst.** Contingency planning for the worst case and rehearsing for it. This builds confidence and allows people to remain calm, when things go wrong. Colonel Westley's troops trained for war not just peacekeeping
- **Moral Courage.** The need for the leader ultimately to do what is right. Often in the face of pressure to do otherwise. Your people expect integrity
- **Boldness.** The courage to go with a plan which is 75% there rather than wait for the gold-plated solution. In many commercial environments, just like the military, seizing the initiative can win the day
- **Visible Leadership.** When times were hard, Richard spent a large part of the day simply communicating with his troops. They needed to see him in the flesh for him to be able to reassure, support and encourage. It is impossible to inspire others from behind a desk

There is one final key leadership role which many fail to spot, that of 'followership'. Along with his colleagues, Richard spent time seeking out and supporting his own commander. Colonel Westley's own followers needed to know what followership looked like in order for them to follow the example.

© Criticaleye 2009

Lieutenant Colonel Richard Westley MC

Richard was commissioned from Sandhurst in April 1984 into the Royal Welch Fusiliers (an Infantry Battalion). He then undertook an exemplary military career and was awarded the Military Cross for gallantry during his time in Bosnia. On promotion to Lieutenant Colonel he was selected to instruct at the Joint Services Command and Staff Course, for senior appointments across the Forces and Civil Service. He became the Commanding Officer of the First Battalion The Worcestershire and Sherwood Foresters (a Battle Group of 690 men) in Afghanistan in December 2004.

Craig Preston

Craig is an IDG leadership development consultant. Prior to consultancy Craig had a successful career in the Army and with Coca-Cola. His clients come from the commercial world, the military and sport.

Contact the authors through 'My Criticaleye'