

THE CASE AGAINST MILITARISM

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Having met, worked and socialised with a myriad of Maritime University and Academy staff around the world, many courtesy of my privileged membership of IMLA , it has struck me how the approach to MET varies throughout these many institutions. There appear to be a series of very distinct regimes across the world. Many flag states choose to train their officer trainees under degree programmes whilst others choose a less academic process. Whether on a degree programme or not, there are also many regimes whom choose a militaristic approach to the training of officers. This militaristic approach is not limited to domestic discipline enforcement; it stretches into the classroom. One might question the function of a military style instructional teaching programme, where the entire premise of producing a watch keeping officer, is to encourage independent problem solving skills.

The problem is that instructional teaching methods do little to instil the required capabilities into a trainee. In the early stages of their training new entrants often have their personality crushed in order for it to be re-built under an enforced discipline regime. They are deliberately overloaded with work, both physical and study, on the premise that life on board a merchant ship will be similarly challenging. This is not necessarily the case.

The argument offered by this paper is based on the contention that a militaristic approach to training breeds “followers” not “leaders”. Trainees learn how to follow “orders”. One concern is that even as a senior officer they will expect Captains to be the only decision maker on board. During a period when the global shipping industry is suffering from an alarming lack of recruits, this is especially concerning.

Introduction

The first point of debate, I would like to raise, related to this topic is that of the development of self discipline versus enforced discipline. The latter as illustrated, is often associated with military style training. An article written for *The Rotarian Magazine* back in September 1928 makes a series of highly relevant points.

“Many observers of military training have noted the fact that the discipline acquired on the drill ground does not carry over into the normal fields of civilian life. It is not, after all, self-discipline. It is discipline under restraint and when the restraint is removed, moral laxity often follows. Military training, moreover, fosters a type of obedience that is wholly uncritical.” (Tittle 1928)

Despite the age of this quote, I feel profound empathy with this point of view. What Merchant Marine officers need in their training, without doubt, is the nurturing of skills which will encourage them to be entirely critical.

Let us deal with the subject in a sequence of headings. Firstly, let me explain exactly what I mean by ‘militarism’.

- Uniform
- Being barked at by instructors
- Sleeping in dormitories
- Rarely being invited to contribute to discussion
- Didactic teaching, see-and-do behaviouristic methods
- Learning by imitation.
- Instructional teaching

Here is a more succinct interpretation of the term by Howard (1977 / 2001), as cited by Brookes (2005);

“[militarism is] simply an acceptance of the values of the military subculture as the dominant values of society: a stress on hierarchy and subordination in organization, on physical courage and self-sacrifice in personal behaviour, on the need for heroic leadership in situations of extreme stress”

How far do these exercises go in developing skills required by a junior watch keeping officer?

What concerns me most is what Tittle referred to as wholly uncritical obedience. I’m not advocating disobedience at all but watch keeping officers need to have their curiosity aroused. They need to be blessed with enquiring minds and problem - solving skills.

There are some aspects of militarism which may be appropriate for staff working on cargo ships but there are many which are not. My concern is that too much emphasis might be placed on the less appropriate aspects. Discipline has to be encouraged, not enforced. Anecdotally, military acquaintances tell me they seek to earn respect by their behaviour.

To give another specific example, Flin (1997) quotes from a seminar presentation by Klein (1995);

“Team training in British industry also appears in a myriad forms ranging from militaristic outward-bound courses to psychodynamic analysis of individual and group functioning. It is likely that some of this training is ineffective because courses are usually generic rather than domain specific and consequently they are not designed to identify or tackle the precise teamwork factors which are critical for a given set of operating conditions”.

A glance through a selection of literature endeavouring to attract applicants to military training programmes highlights where the emphases lay. Here is one example which seems to bear out my own perspective, though I would suggest, inadvertently;

“The third module deals with the learning environment, providing revision on lesson structure and assessment, as well as instruction on learning methodology.

During the final element of the course, the student will prepare and deliver a number of instructional periods, theory- and practical-based. This module refreshes and revitalises instructional techniques”.(Fensom 2011)

The phrase that I find most bewildering details “instruction on learning methodology”. Surely learning takes place by the student, yet the text appears to imply that the objectives can be achieved by instruction alone. Of course this text applies to one specific institution and is not necessarily a reflection of maritime academies around the world. Yet from the informal research I’ve carried out, maybe the two fields are associated.

Here are some responses to a very informal set of questions I posed to various cadets from a highly geographically varied number of sources;

Questionnaire

- 1 Would you describe the training regime under which you are currently being subject at all militaristic?

Yes, I would say it is militaristic.

- 2 What exactly would you describe as being militaristic?

Having to wear a uniform, parading every day. Teaching by rote and domestic living. Pre-breakfast run.

Perhaps too formalised because I don’t think we’re in a militaristic industry. The tutors often find it an imposition as well.

Run by ‘soldiers’ that retain a militaristic hierarchy, though this is not a bad structure in terms of preparing you for life on a ship.

Ships’ officers get angry.

- 3 Do you wear a uniform during the day?

Yes

- 4 Do you march between buildings on campus?
Sometimes but not everyday.
- 5 With how many people do you share your room / dormitory?
A dormitory with about 25 other people. This is a good way to encourage teamwork especially after leaving home and school or college.
- 6 At your Maritime university / academy, describe positions of responsibility you have been given so far.
Helping tutors co-ordinate studies
- 7 Are most of the tutors at your establishment former seafarers?
Those that are former merchant seafarers are better to teach maritime subjects than former military staff who just instil a military attitude.
- 8 Are there any other factors related to your militaristic style training that you can comment on?
I think that it may help us deal with pirates. On the plus side, if the style of training instils us with organisation and discipline, these are important factors at sea.

Here is another example. Whilst I cannot possibly reveal the precise source, I will so far to say it is from an academy in the Eastern hemisphere. Believe it or not, a Maritime Academy tutor wrote this.

“When one goes to [the Academy], one feels that the main importance is surviving the day, not seizing the day. The focus is not academics. The normal students focus is how not to get noticed by his upperclassmen, how to avoid demerits, and for them training is something that the Department of [omitted to preserve anonymity] do, and do not see the meaning of training in the maritime context”.

What strikes me about this lucid observation is that in very much the same way as Tittle was explaining, learners are most likely to cope with the onslaught by developing *coping strategies*. That means that incremental development in terms of learning is likely to be stifled as individuals concentrate on surviving, treading water so to speak and not putting their efforts into learning and progressing. Inevitably, they are likely to feel oppressed.

Interpretation of findings

It's perhaps worth looking at the theory of coping strategies.

“Apart from personality traits, people also tend to develop habitual modes and methods of managing stress and coping with upsetting emotions. By and large, these habitual methods do help people to manage and defuse stressful situations they find themselves in, but they are not all equally efficient at this task”. (Dombeck and Wells-Moran 2006)

Here are a couple of examples and I wonder if they seem at all familiar to the reader. I cannot entirely alienate myself from these ideas if I think back to my formative years.

- **Denial**; an outright refusal or inability to accept some aspect of reality that is troubling. For example: "this thing has not happened" when it actually has.
- **Splitting**; a person cannot stand the thought that someone might have both good and bad aspects, so they polarize their view of that person as someone who is "all good" or "all bad". Any evidence to the contrary is ignored. For example: "My boss is evil", after being let go from work, when in reality, the boss had no choice in the matter and was acting under orders herself. Splitting functions by way of dissociation, which is an ability people have in varying amounts to be able to wall off certain experiences and not think about them.

There are several more coping strategies mentioned but these two examples give an idea of how they might be used as a self-defence mechanisms.

Where a learner is having trouble coping with reality because the training regime is so oppressive, how are they likely to cope with the reality on board a cargo ship? If another ship comes hurtling toward their own, the trained navigators will need to make a quick and informed decision, not exist in a state of denial. As described by Chauvin et al (2008);

"The major variables of the decision-making process are the interpretation of the rules and anticipation of the other vessel's intentions".

How will the adoption of coping strategies during the formative training stage of a navigator help them in such a collision avoidance situation? How do military style factors assist in the resolution of it?

Here is another description of a national military training routine;

"In the military, there will ALWAYS be someone telling you what to do, when to do it, and how to do it -- and you've got to do it. Sometimes they'll tell you to do something that you don't want to do, or tell you in a way that makes you angry. Failing to do it is not an option. The wilful disobeying of a lawful order won't just get you "fired," as it would in a civilian occupation, it can get you sent to jail".
(Powers 2011)

It goes on to describe the rationale.

"The training programs are scientifically and psychologically designed to tear apart the "civilian" and build from scratch a proud, physically fit, and dedicated member of the [National] Armed Forces.(Powers 2011)

So why is military style training so favoured by so many institutions involved in MET? I find it hard to associate these training methods with the objectives of an MET institution. There are certain, individual qualities that I can quite easily see would be advantageous to the merchant mariner but many others that seem completely out of place. My opinion is that the encouragement of certain military traits is actually counter productive.

To provide a foundation for these opinions of mine, let me refer to a series of observations about the state of maritime training in a global context. As covered by the trade magazine Tanker Operator in their 30th May 2011 edition;

“Concern has been expressed over the recent increase in the number of casualties, resulting in a call for greater shipboard competence levels”.

The article quotes the President of DNV, Tor Svensen, as declaring;

“A downward trend in safety statistics creates concerns and it is now time to reinstall the balance between safety and environmental risk. A greater focus on the human elements and competence is needed”.

In the light of this I'm not convinced militaristic style MET will address the problem.

Furthermore, he points out that;

“the negative trend in accident rates indicates that we are no longer managing to get the balance right”.(Svensen 2011).

Psychologically and scientifically tearing apart a civilian is not going to encourage them to develop a sense of accurate judgement. It may help them to follow orders in 'wholly uncritical obedience'.

A correspondent of mine, a deck cadet whom has recently completed their third trip at sea commented;

“The ship environment is very stressful and small errors can cause big problems. Officers can get very angry”.(Anon 2011)

Once again, the quote cannot be attributed in the interests of anonymity. This is from someone who acknowledges their training culture (adjacent to the Mediterranean) is very closely matched with militarism. The association between the referenced literature and someone currently at the coalface, so to speak, is not a tenuous one.

With respect to some of the terminology used, in particularly the terms *competence* and *competency*, I refer to an article in the June 2011 Nautical Institute magazine *Seaways*, contributed by Captain Robert K Rayer;

*“Competence is doing the required task to the required standard. It is an outcome.
Competency is the performance standard. It is not a training standard”.*

So my concern is that a military style of training is too emphatic in terms of instruction, rather than the learning process. Comparing military and merchant marine references appears to bear out these concerns.

Another difference in my opinion is that under a military regime, there are likely to be significantly more people around than there are on a merchant ship, with the possible exception of cruise liners and passenger ferries which are usually well manned.

A recent technical paper cites a selection of personal qualities required by senior Merchant Navy officers;

“However, the expectations of the ship management companies are related to additional qualifications and personality characteristics such as motivation, discipline, congeniality, tenderness [and] endurance to sea conditions”. (Celik 2007).

I would suggest the discipline referred to is self discipline rather than enforced discipline. Other than that particular quality, I don't see many others in the list that match those required by military organisations, mentioned elsewhere in this paper.

Another reference depicts the contrast between military and merchant naval personnel working together on a cargo ship that had been contracted by the state defence department. The ship and crew were handling packages of ammunition being assisted and guided by military staff. This took place during the 1990s;

"It was an experiment in outsourcing that proved to be a remarkable success. The civilian crew was tasked with everything that the navy crew had done, including some classified tasks and was able to do it with a fraction of the manpower and cost. In addition, the navy found that a civilian crew offered them more continuity and reduced their training responsibilities. The crew members were somewhat older, better trained and further along their careers. Unlike the navy crew they weren't frequently rotated ashore to new positions. These were professional seamen who ran a professional ship". (Cruikshank and Kline 2008)

This is not to opine that merchant seamen make better ammunition handlers than military but just to indicate the qualities demonstrated by professional and well trained merchant ship staff. My reflection on this report is that the military staff involved in the task were impressed with the professionalism of the merchant marine staff. Their training and development had produced capable, organised and adaptable professionals. I'm certainly not implying the military are not capable of producing the same but the report indicates very clearly, a perceived difference between the products of two cultures.

It seems to me that there are a select few qualities that militaristic style training brings to merchant seafarers and that many institutions go a little too far down this road. Self-discipline, application, professionalism, teamwork and adaptability are certainly mutually desirable. However, the idea of marching around a campus in uniform and having to live in large dormitories in close proximity to large numbers of fellow learners has, to my mind, questionable benefits. As if it wasn't commonly acknowledged, it is the *scarcity* of ship staff that is causing so much concern in the industry presently, not overcrowded cargo ships; not overcrowded with crew, that's for sure.

"Commercial shipping is suffering from the worst shortage of qualified crew in living memory, with a possible shortage of 27,000-30,000 officers by 2015 according to recent estimates being discussed at shipping forums around the world". (Canty 2007)

Training for the culture of compliance.

My final observation concerns what I believe to be a consequence of type of militaristic style indoctrination cited so far. This is often referred to within the industry as the 'culture of compliance'. What exactly does the term mean?

"You might look at external regulatory requirements, compliance from a risk-management perspective, compliance from an operations perspective, or compliance from a technology requirements perspective". (Towle 2005)

Some theorists regard this as apposite characteristic, as indeed the author of the above article does but let me put the phrase into a more specific context. Cargo and passenger ships are largely commercially operated. Even those not so, perhaps run by state-owned

enterprises, are subject to commercial pressures, so cost effective management is paramount.

In order to operate in the first place every regulatory requirement has to be met. They are not aspirations or levels to aim for; they are the basis, the foundations of operations. Commercial success in the face of determined competition by fellow operators will not be achieved by regulatory compliance alone. Commercial advantage must be achieved and maintained. By their nature, military enterprises are, with few exceptions, state run enterprises, so they don't have to deal with such commercial competition. Of course they are subject to financial constraints but they don't face the threat of commercial liquidation in the same way.

Shipping companies, employers of the learners of everyone here, have to compete by providing the same products and service more cost effectively than their competitors. Market forces dictate as much. The culture of compliance to regulations alone will not achieve the required commercial output or performance.

May I refer once again to Tor Svensen (2011) President of Desk Norse Veritas, the Classification Society who opines;

“the industry needs to think beyond compliance and be proactive”.

I agree. We need to encourage forward thinking and anticipation. Uncritical obedience will not equip our learners to succeed in today's shipping industry. Trainees will not be given the opportunity to develop into leaders with experience and finely tuned managerial skills. The effects of this are all too prevalent, when we see one individual, the Chief Officer or worse still the Captain solely conducting cargo operations for the duration of the ship's visit.

Conclusion

Whilst a select few characteristics of military training are appropriate to training techniques of MET establishments, the above argument evidences concerns that it is being used too much as a template. Too many militaristic aspects appear to be too prevalent in MET establishments across the world, which do not address current industry debates. In many cases, military training expects numerous staff to be available to enhance manpower or delegation opportunities. Merchant Navy training needs to accept that decision making has to be achieved with very low numbers involved in an operation.

Even my learned and esteemed friend and colleague from Dalian Maritime University, Wang Huanxin, concurs;

“However, semi-military management has some deficiencies and disadvantages, The content of semi-military management needs to change in order to adjust to the development of society”. (Huanxin 2010).

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