

Combat Readiness - What Matters

Capt. Martin A. SEBASTIAN RMN (R)

1. In the traditional sense of maritime security, military forces are employed as instruments of foreign policy to safeguard maritime interests and sovereignty. However, in contemporary maritime security scenarios, the employment of these forces has been more towards defence diplomacy and confidence building measures for obvious reasons. Whilst diplomats prefer to use negotiation, arbitration and litigation, militaries rely on combat readiness as credible deterrents when push comes to shove. However, numbers, size, and obsolescence have been blamed as major factors in the minimal deterrence capability of these forces. While the above is true, the question then is what matters when it comes to being combat-ready.

2. History has shown that while size matters, *goliaths* have fallen to *Davids*. Vietnam and Afghanistan against the Superpowers are cases in contemporary history, while during the Pacific Wars where in the Battle of Midway, US Forces operating only two carriers sank four Japanese carriers and almost annihilated their fleet. The *Peloponnesian War* offers stark reminders of strategy against size, will against might. The point here is that the credibility of military forces lies on capability and the inspiration of the very men and women that answer the call to defend their countries.

3. Therefore, it is vital that they be inspired with the necessary leadership and setting, not only to honour their contribution but also to ensure that they will

be ready to employ a variety of resources - involving both hard- and soft-ware - when the time comes. Then again, what needs to be addressed?

4. To be a deterrent force, military forces at all levels must be able to provide expert advice for executive decisions. When discussing the role of lower ranks, the *Strategic Corporal* comes to mind. In *The Three Block War*, U.S. Marine General Charles Krulak describes a concept which illustrates the complex spectrum of challenges likely to be faced by the marines on the modern battlefield which may require full-scale military action, peacekeeping operations, and humanitarian aid within the space of three contiguous city blocks. The ability to lead professionally in these three scenarios is in the hands of a Corporal who leads the squad, hence The Strategic Corporal. Can Corporals handle complex scenarios like these today? What will be needed to enable this type of leadership in a maritime setting? Does a Non Commissioned Officer (NCO) have the necessary skill sets to lead?

5. I now turn to the young officers. In military training, *Ivan Pavlov's* stimulus-response comes to bear. Young men and women, taken from civilian life and formed into military leaders face operant conditioning during training where stimuli is introduced through punishment or reward. Rewards in terms of recognition through rank, positions, and favourable postings on completion of the training stimulates competition to be the best of the best. Are these young men and women conditioned appropriately? Do they have the necessary attitude and aptitude to rise above the rest in giving their best?

6. Then is the issue of senior leadership, with emphasis on leadership. Are militaries producing leaders or managers? Are they just managing their environment or developing cutting edge leadership ideas. What seems to be the priority as they age towards retirement and commitments become heavy? Is being professional worth it?

7. The above questions are pertinent not only to maintain expensive military assets but also in light of the recent reports on corruption, extremism, moonlighting, and many other ills clouding the minds of the very men and women who answered the call to defend their country. They say an idle mind is a devil's workshop, the challenge then is to keep military forces busy, in honing their skills and in being ready when duty calls.

8. Perhaps it is time to revisit the stimuli through simulated exercises or prepare for a variety of contingencies to achieve calibrated responses. In doing so, we may need to go to the basics, to revisit the fundamentals and ask, what matters?