



A BRIDGE TO LEADERSHIP LESSONS

Once more into the breach... as we follow up on our report of leadership learning on the battlefields of the Somme (PM November 2006), with a firsthand account from Chartered Manager and Institute Fellow **Dr Richard Cullen** about his experiences following in the footsteps of those who fought at the Battle of Arnhem in WWII

In the chill of an autumn evening we stood in peaceful tranquillity before the war memorial in the Commonwealth War Graves Commission Cemetery in Oosterbeek, Holland. We were surrounded by the graves of 1,700 British, Commonwealth and Polish Airborne troops killed in action over a period of just 10 days, between 17 and 26 September 1944.

My voice kept breaking with emotion as I recited Laurence Binyon's *Poem for the Fallen*. Dave, a senior manager from DHL, had just laid a wreath in tribute at the base of the memorial. Alison, a regional director for an insurance company, read a poem – *I Will Always Be Twenty-one*, written by one of the veterans of the Battle of Arnhem who had accompanied us on this unique leadership experience. The poem was dedicated to his best friend, killed by a sniper on the first day of the battle.

During the minute's silence which we observed, I reflected that the immaculately maintained graves held the remains of people like us – they were fathers, sons, husbands and brothers; people with families and friends – who never got the chance to return to their homelands having made the ultimate sacrifice due, in some measure, to poor leadership.

Transportable skills

This time of personal reflection brought to an emotional and fitting end a leadership programme the equal of which I have never undertaken in my 30 years as a senior leader. Few of us will ever have to make leadership decisions that may result in loss of life but the lessons from the strategic leadership course 'Lessons from the Battlefield'™, organised by training organisation Now That's Different (NTD), are directly transportable into any organisation.

The participants were a disparate group, drawn from commercial, public and private organisations. None of us had a military background, few had much prior knowledge of the historic battle, other than seeing the film 'A Bridge Too Far' and I was the only one who could in any way be described as an amateur historian and yet at the end of the trip we shared a bond that I believe will endure.

I had some trepidation about the programme; was it a glorification of war, was it about delivering a military style of leadership, would it be applicable to the workplace?

Leadership styles

The moment we emerged from Eindhoven Airport we received a warm greeting from the course directors – Neil Powell, a passionate military historian and leadership developer, and Bob Mansell, a former West Midlands police superintendent and leadership developer. They, together with Steve O'Smotherly, a development consultant and performance coach, are the directors of NTD.

Our initial briefing dispelled many of my fears as the programme uses the leadership lessons of battles, in this case Arnhem, to explore the leadership styles of participants and enable them to gain an understanding of leadership, reflect on how they lead and what leadership looks like in their organisations.

Neil told us from the outset that there would be no

extolling of military leadership values. Instead the course would enable participants to examine what happened at Arnhem and why the audacious airborne attack failed. We would be examining the fatal flaws in the planning, the wrong leaders in the wrong jobs, nepotism and lack of leadership ability: Also, the lack of communication, which was compounded by an apparent absence of 'mission command'.

This would be contrasted with examples of brilliant and inspirational leadership on the field of battle itself in the face of absolute adversity. What we were assured of was that this was not going to be a 'chalk and talk' event and that proved to be the case. This is a very different style of programme, which lies somewhere between traditional courses and outward bound, action-centred leadership style events.

During the briefing session we were offered coaching by Bob and Steve, the course directors, if required, and were given a range of course materials including glossy, well-written and illustrated books. This material included an overview of 'Operation Market Garden', the code name for the Arnhem operation, as well as details of the various 'stands' (the different learning venues) we would be visiting, such as Frost's Bridge – the bridge at Arnhem.

Associated with each 'stand' were leadership questions for us to answer individually and in sub-groups. At 'stand two' a decision-making model is introduced. This was followed by an introduction to the concept of 'mission command', a system that decentralises command and associates it with task, not an individual's level in an organisation.

The models were all contained in a further book and at the end of day one we were given the background information for the programme's case study – a non-military case study using NTD's Informed Forecasting Model™, a multi-level problem solving, decision-making and planning tool that helps strategic and operational decision-makers to produce a number of viable and workable options leading to the right decision in the given time frame.

The case study builds, using the model, until the end of the programme; I found it powerful and useful. The course directors provided 'ideal' answers after groups/individuals had worked through the various aspects of the case study. A support CD of all the course material is provided.

The supporting materials also included NTD's 'Four Seasons Profiling' tool, which is similar to MBTI® (Myers-Briggs Type Indicator), but gives individuals a preferred primary and secondary behavioural preference. This was a very useful model that we shared with each other and it probably helped us to understand each other's needs from the outset. The model and our leadership backgrounds determined which group we worked in.

The leadership debate continued over coffee, during lunch breaks, when travelling between 'stands' and late into each evening. NTD's approach to leadership very much supports my academic and operational research into the subject, namely that effective leaders need to be able to deal with planning and detail and yet also provide the spark that ignites the flame.

I am convinced that it is impossible to define leadership



Des Page, a glider pilot with E Sqn Glider Pilot Regiment, at the landing zone where troops parachuted down to take part in the battle

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because leaders have to be much more than transformational or transactional. I am writing a book entitled *Front Line Leadership™*, which examines this, principally in terms of leading in crisis or critical incident situations, but it is equally applicable to local delivery across all sectors. I feel that NTD's Arnhem course strongly supports this concept.

First-hand accounts

There were a number of big leaders involved in the campaign who could be categorised as transformational leaders but some of these extrovert characters proved inadequate to the task because they did not possess or did not display the skills of planning, communication and the execution of mission command that were required to make Operation Market Garden a success.

Although with hindsight it was possible that Arnhem was indeed a bridge too far, with effective strategic planning, mission command and the right people doing the right job, WWII in Europe could have been brought to an earlier conclusion if the battle had had a successful outcome for the Allied forces.

I stayed overnight at Stansted before flying to Holland and was fortunate to have the opportunity to dine with the two veterans of the battle who were to accompany us on the course. Vince Godwin BEM was a paratrooper who finished the battle as a Lance Corporal and who throughout served with John Frost (later to become a Major-General) in the bitter fighting to defend the bridge. He was wounded on Thursday 21 September 1944 and transported to Stalag Luft 4B. Veteran Des Page was a glider pilot with E Sqn Glider Pilot Regiment. He went on to fight in a number of the engagements in the Arnhem area.

These two octogenarians, together with taped interviews of other veterans now sadly departed, brought to life the leadership issues and dilemmas that troops on the ground faced, for example, the selection of glider and airborne landing sites too far from their objectives.

They told us of the breakdown of planning and about the unrealistic nature of the objectives and the inadequacy of many of the senior leaders. Both men were heroes and each had to take leadership responsibility at a local level during the battle. They are the most self-effacing and modest men that I have ever met. We were all humbled in their presence. Vince Godwin, an artist, showed us pictures he had drawn during lulls in the battle and when he was a prisoner of war.

The visit to the Airborne Museum at the former Hartenstein Hotel that featured so prominently in the battle for the bridge, left all of us drying our eyes as the full horror of the leadership errors was vividly brought to life in the video which is shown at the beginning of the museum tour.

By standing on the shoulders of these two giants, Vince Godwin and Des Page, I was able to see things that I had never realised about leadership and the impact leaders have on those who follow them.

Personal humility

Although team building was not an intended part of the programme that is exactly what happened. There was gen-

uine sadness as we said our goodbyes at Stansted and I have already committed to act as a coach and mentor to one of my companions.

In summary, all of those who describe themselves as leaders and certainly those at the highest levels, need to reflect on their leadership abilities and capabilities and consider the effect they have on those who follow them or on whom they impact.

Over three days in Holland I was exposed to a dose of personal humility that I have never previously experienced as a leader. Despite three hard, challenging and tiring days I returned to work refreshed and determined to develop my leadership capabilities further.

Was it a life changing experience? Possibly: A leadership changing experience, definitely. I would encourage anyone to experience it if they think they can take the dose of reality and humility that comes with it.

At the end of our brief ceremony at the war memorial, Vince Godwin asked me to go with him to his best friend's grave. The comrades in arms had fought side by side in Africa and Italy before taking part in the Battle of Arnhem. His friend was married with a baby on the way, a child he would never see.

Vince placed a poppy cross on the grave and said his goodbyes with tears in his eyes. As we stood there in silent remembrance of the young man that would always be 21, I recalled Thomas Moore's poem *Oft in the Stilly Night*:

*When I remembered all
The friends, so link'd together
I've seen around me fall
Like leaves in wintry weather
I feel like one
Who treads alone
Some banquet-hall deserted
Whose lights are fled
Whose garlands dead
And all, but he, departed!
Thus, in the stilly night
Ere slumber's chain hath bound me
Sad mem'ry brings the light
Of other days around me*

I hope as a leader I can live up to the expectations that Vince and Des had in those that led them but sadly failed to deliver.

Dr Richard Cullen OStJ (Order of St John) is a former Commander and Director of Training and Development with the Metropolitan Police Service. He is Chair of the Strategic Planning Society and a member of the Advisory Board of Oxford Brookes University's Centre for Applied HR Research. He is currently writing a book on Front Line Leadership. He is a Chartered Manager and Fellow of the Chartered Management Institute and an Advocate for the Chartered Manager scheme.



Veterans of the battle Des Page and Vince Godwin with NTD course director Neil Powell

Further Information

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