
OPINION

Fifty Shades of Grey: Officer Culture in the Australian Army

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ABSTRACT

As the Australian Army begins a transition from a decade abroad it is timely to ask what we know about its officer culture, how that has been moulded by operational deployments and whether the Army officer corps is ready for the challenges ahead. This article argues that egalitarianism, the 'natural soldier myth' and bureaucracy in the Australian Army combine to create an officer culture in which excellence and professionalism are not respected and officers are overly keen to minimise the rank divide.

There can't be too many armies in the world where a young officer craves to be called something other than 'sir'. In Australia the word can swiftly become pejorative, uttered with unmistakable disdain.

*Chris Masters
Uncommon Soldier*

We know a few things about officers in the Australian Army. The average Australian Army officer will serve for just over 13 years, just one in five has a tertiary degree, and 15% on average are recruited from amongst the ranks.¹ But Australian Army officers also eat after their troops and yearn to be called 'boss'. Australian Army officers shun tattoos and choose their personal car carefully, lest they be labelled as having 'other rank tendencies'. Australian Army officers also learn, from the very beginning of their training, that their ideal role model is 'the grey man' who sticks with the mob and doesn't strive to attract attention. But getting to the core of what underpins officer culture in the Australian Army is a difficult task, and one this article can only just begin to address. As the Australian Army begins a transition from a decade abroad it is timely to ask what kind of culture exists in its officer corps, how that culture has been moulded by operational deployments, and whether that officer corps is ready for the challenges ahead. There are inherent difficulties in answering these questions. Even divining basic statistical data on Australia's Army officer corps can be difficult, and there is little published scholarship on the subject of what makes Australian Army officers different from those of other countries. Understandably, our officers don't write much about themselves. Only two (Major Generals Molan and Cantwell) have written books on their operational experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan. At a time when the wider Australian Defence Force (ADF) is reflecting deeply on its culture and what pathways will lead to cultural change, there is a surprising lack of introspection on the leadership culture in Australia's largest military service. As Army faces a possible change to its mission and sweeping changes to its force structure, it's worth addressing what common factors drive its leaders and how they might face the challenges of the uncertain strategic times ahead.

The perspective I will offer here is neither data driven nor conclusive. It is largely based on my own observations and those gleaned from an informal survey of colleagues both currently serving and recently retired. I hope that it will be vigorously interrogated.

There are three intertwining influences that underpin officer culture in the Australian Army. The first is a deeply cherished, widespread belief in the value of egalitarianism — particularly where it applies to relationships between soldiers

and officers. The second influence is the 'natural soldier' myth which weaves its way through much of the tradition and folklore of the Australian Army. And the third factor is the steady march of bureaucracy. These three influences combine in unexpected ways and, taken together, they have resulted in an officer culture that is increasingly risk averse, bureaucratic and bland. This is a culture that does not value excellence as much as other militaries. And it is a culture in which the professional aspects of 'officership' are not given the respect they deserve. In short, our officer culture is very grey indeed.

The consequences of this culture are cause for some concern in a small army that is seeking to reinvent itself as flexible, agile and smart. The consequences of an overly bureaucratic officer corps are reasonably clear; however the implications of other cultural aspects may be less readily discernible. An obsession with egalitarianism, for example, can lead to a lack of performance culture and a tendency to over-generalise the skills base of the officer corps. The ascendancy of the natural soldier myth in Australian Army (and wider community) thinking can lead to an obsession with the tactical, a neglect of strategy and generalship, and a lacklustre approach to maintaining officer professionalism. And the significance of these consequences is magnified because Australia's Army officers are remarkably homogenous (much more so ethnically and demographically than the wider Australian community). Despite an increase in non-conventional entries into the Australian Army officer corps (lateral transfers from overseas, in-service promotions through the ASWOC scheme), the overwhelming majority of officers still enter through a single institution — RMC Duntroon.

First, it's useful to define what we mean by 'culture'. Edgar Schien provides a useful definition of culture as:

... the deeper level of basic assumptions and beliefs that are: learned responses to the group's problems of survival in its external environment and its problems of internal integration; are shared by members of an organization; that operate unconsciously; and that define in a basic 'taken-for-granted' fashion an organization's view of itself and its environment.²

Culture is built and reinforced by shared traditions, behaviours and practices. These can be major traditions such as ANZAC Day or other more subtle and seemingly innocuous traditions. The tradition within the Australian Army which sees officers eat last appears relatively innocuous, yet it is a powerful and pervasive way of reinforcing the belief that officers should subordinate their personal needs to those of their soldiers — and that rank should not necessarily confer privilege.

The culture of our officer corps and the self-identity of officers are mutually reinforcing. How officers see themselves is underpinned by the dominant organisational culture. This has a direct influence on what officers think, what attributes they believe they need to develop, and how they seek to do their job.

Isolating the culture specific to the officer corps is difficult. There are many cultures and sub-cultures within the Australian Army. Some are based on particular traditions and practices within and between corps. Junior officer training in a cavalry regiment, for example, is remarkably different to that of a signals regiment. There are perceived cultural differences between north and south: personnel posted to units in Darwin proudly distinguish themselves from those posted to Melbourne or Adelaide. Similarly, there are cultural differences between the 'lightfighters' of 3 Brigade and the mechanised warriors of 1 Brigade (though, as Plan Beersheba rolls out, these cultural differences seem likely to dissipate). There was an Army airborne culture; there may yet be an Army amphibious culture. Army's instructional units and training institutions have their own specific cultures and practices. There is a cultural difference between the wider Army and Army Headquarters, one author commenting that, coming from regimental units, 'newly arrived officers often find themselves confused and disoriented by the significant differences'.³ There are cultural differences between the conventional Army and Special Forces, and specific cultures within the constituent parts of Special Operations Command too. Sometimes these cultures coalesce, and not always with good results. For example, criticism has been levelled at the way some Special Forces cultural practices have rubbed off on the broader Army. Army's culture also values conventional warfighting skills over stabilisation and peacekeeping — operational experience in Afghanistan and Iraq is more highly valued than service in East Timor and the Solomon Islands. Finally, the make-up of Army's senior officers shows that combat officers are more highly valued than logisticians.

Army's cultural identity is constantly changing. In the past decade, close cooperation with partners and allies has led to the fusion of ideas and values. The Australian military appreciation process has become less British and more American because of Australian embedding in US military organisations. Some believe this has gone too far and that Army's officers are uncritically adopting ideas and practices from the US military that are inappropriate for Australia's small army. Others believe this has made Army a more professional and focused force. A degree of generational change is also underway within the officer corps, changing the beliefs that officers hold about the longevity of their

career and the importance of their non-Army life, although it is easy to overstate the impact of Gen Y on Army.⁴ However, certainly within Army and the wider ADF, significant reinterpretation and reshaping of culture along gender and diversity lines is occurring.

Wider changes occurring within the officer corps of other countries in recent decades have been similarly reflected in the Australian Army officer corps. A seminal US Army War College study into professionalism and leadership in the US Army officer corps identified a shift in pivotal values and practices among US Army officers after Vietnam.⁵ In essence, this research found that officers were increasingly less focused on their duty to the service and more focused on their individual needs and career, reflecting an occupational approach to 'officership' rather than an institutional one. Australian authors found that Army's effectiveness was enhanced if its officers were more institutionally motivated and derived their self-image from Army's culture rather than their civilian life. Another Australian study on this issue concluded that the Australian Army was a mix of both occupational and institutional cultures, drawing the best aspects of both to create a 'pragmatic institution' that blended individual needs and choices within a culture of duty and service.⁶ Determining what Australian Army officer culture is, can also be achieved by comparison with Australian Army soldier and non-commissioned officer culture, and the officer culture of other nations.

Like the wider Australian community from which they are drawn, Army officers believe in the importance of egalitarianism. But this quality is not as unique to Australian Army culture as some might believe. A Dutch officer comparing American and Dutch officer culture found that, in the Dutch Army, 'the formalities between ranks are not as pronounced as in many other cultures'.⁷ In the Australian context, the importance of egalitarianism appears to be a visceral reaction to the pomp of the British officer class. Australian Army folklore records with disdain the privileges and elitism of the British military. In the Australian Army, rank alone does not confer privilege and a commission itself is not enough to guarantee loyalty and respect. Australian officers are exceptionally careful not to appear aloof from their men, hence the practice of eating last at mealtimes. But while care for soldiers is an important quality in officers and empathy with other ranks is a vital aid to military effectiveness, it is possible that Australian Army officers may have over-compensated for the practices of their colonial ancestors (and thrown away several useful British officer traditions in the meantime). The cultural cringe at setting boundaries between the ranks may be undermining military discipline. Soldiers might be excessively indulged by officers who are reluctant to criticise or discipline

because of their need to be accepted by the men — and to be called ‘boss’ rather than ‘sir’. Egalitarianism works two ways in the officer-soldier relationship. While junior officers in particular may be earnestly trying to shape their role and appear as non-elite and unofficer-like as possible, soldiers may be conditioned not to respect junior officers. The cultural cringe against elitism in the military might in fact be undermining the value of being an officer.

The Australian Army — and Australian society — do not appear to place a high premium on ‘officership’. This is in part because of the myth of the ‘natural Australian soldier’. Reinforced consistently through the rites of ANZAC, popular culture, and media portrayals of the military, the myth holds that Australians are natural soldiers because of their athleticism and ingenuity. In such thinking, Australian soldiers require little training or leadership and officers are a bumbling nuisance who are tolerated rather than required. None of Australia’s almost 4000 war memorials depicts an officer; rather, all idolise the figure of the Australian soldier. At times, this message has been accidentally reinforced by the comments and initiatives of Army’s senior leadership. In 2009, the Army commissioned expensive individual medallions for every service member to identify the nine signature behaviours expected of the Australian Army. As a signal of what leadership believed Army’s culture should be, it was unequivocal. The medallions proclaimed ‘I’m an Australian Soldier’ and the RSM-Army at the time confidently declared ‘our soldiers are world renowned’. In this entire branding exercise there was no mention of the role of officers, instead one of the signature behaviours declared that every soldier was expected to be a leader. Culture is shaped as much by what is neglected as by what is celebrated. The annals of Australian military history are stacked high with tales of personal acts of tactical heroism, and the majority of Australia’s military heroes are soldiers. Strategy, logistical excellence and the professional leadership of Army officers do not appear to be highly respected commodities. One colleague believes this also explains the rise of a ‘mandarin-class of Tier C and D RSMs’ in the past decade. And there are other consequences in an army in which the professional skill of officers is not respected. In a 2003 *Australian Defence Force Journal* article, Lieutenant Colonel Luke Carroll argued that the Australian Army has an unhealthy ‘tactical culture’. It makes sense that in an army in which the officer is not respected, higher end professional warfighting skills such as strategy are not respected either. Thus Australian Army officers place a higher value on gaining tactical rather than strategic skills (though it must be acknowledged that operational and strategic command opportunities are limited). The culture of egalitarianism within the Australian Army often means that officers, and their skills, are less respected than they would be in other armies.

This concern for egalitarianism and lack of respect for the leadership of officers also shapes dynamics within the officer corps. If there is nothing particularly special about being an officer, then there is nothing particularly valuable about being an excellent officer. The Australian Army officer corps has less of a performance based-culture than its peer militaries. Try to name the most excellent officers in the Australian Army — not the most senior, or those with the most operational experience, but the most excellent in logistics, combat and strategy. It is egalitarianism that led instructors at RMC and elsewhere to advise my classmates and me to 'play the grey man' who sticks with the mob and does not distinguish himself. And this attitude permeates throughout Army. Performance reporting throughout the officer corps is inflated and masks both mediocrity and excellence. Few officers are demoted or sacked for poor performance. Promotion courses are set to the lowest common denominator and failures are rare. Until recently, mediocre performance was tolerated even at the Australian Command and Staff College where very few officers failed either the professional or academic components of the course. The Australian Army has often been criticised for being anti-intellectual. This is wrong; intellectualism is there to be found. What the Australian Army has is an anti-excellence culture.

Egalitarianism shapes the very way we structure postings and career trajectories. More than other armies, the Australian Army focuses on generalised career paths for officers. The US and Swedish armies, for example, are moving to select future strategic leaders earlier because war has become more technical, fast-paced and complex. Australia does not begin to groom its officers for higher command or link promotion to performance until the rank of major. At that point an officer is 13 years into his or her military career. Given the average length of Army officer service is 13.6 years, this means that Army does not formally identify its highest performing officers until the point at which most of them are already considering leaving the military. In the US military promising junior officers are formally identified much earlier — some captains start developing strategic skills through a joint service program which posts them to strategic organisations and then to complete a top tier civilian postgraduate degree. The Australian Army educates its junior officers to the lowest common denominator. All-corps promotion courses, for example, place infantry officers alongside dentists to learn battalion tactics. Officers often comment that the Australian military is more versatile and adaptable than the US military precisely because its personnel are trained as generalists. As a matter of policy, officers rotate through multiple postings on their way to lieutenant colonel, a practice that incurs high costs for Army. Frequent postings may produce officers who are more conventional in their approach to their jobs, who focus on the

tactical issues in their posting rather than strategic tasks and who have a reduced ability to handle the complexity of modern warfare.⁸ Arguably, it is a belief in egalitarianism that fosters a default to a generalist officer posting approach in the Australian Army. This cultural bias requires the career officer to move ‘through a succession of increasingly senior staff appointments ... like a sportsman whose primary sport is rugby, but who is then required to captain a soccer team, followed by coaching in hockey.’⁹ Our inbuilt cultural biases, including an aversion to the officer culture in the British regimental system, may well be blinding us to the virtues of more specialised career streaming. Similarly, a default to the pursuit of generalist officer skills might lead to a system that underprepares officers for more managerial postings and positions. We expect that our most highly skilled regimental officers will naturally excel at strategic human resource management when posted in career management roles, or that combat officers will thrive in a staff headquarters role with little additional training for their specific role. And the ADF, one author argues, prefers to promote ‘conformist, cautious tactical officers anyway’.¹⁰ Egalitarianism, shaped by the natural soldier myth, may engender a lack of performance culture and over-generalisation of officer skills in the Australian Army.

The increasing bureaucracy of the Australian Army officer corps is also relevant in shaping officer culture. Several factors suggest that this ‘bureaucratisation’ is occurring, including anecdotal evidence from officers and bureaucrats alike. Speaking at a Military Sociology conference in December last year, a senior military official lamented that Army had become ‘really good at politics and bureaucracy’. In his valedictory address six years ago, then Defence Secretary Ric Smith warned of a growing:

... plethora of directives, guidelines, procedural criteria and so on that we are required to have to deal with in a host of situations that may arise in the course of our work. These compliance requirements are often driven by fear of criticism and of litigation and compensation claims. They are very often put in place in response to an administrative error or a breakdown in decision making or advising of Ministers. They often substitute for, and indeed limit the scope for, common sense, values-based judgments. And in minimising the scope for reasonable risk-taking behaviour, rules and guidelines, they limit Public Service creativity and effectiveness.

A similar phenomenon seems to exist among the uniformed members of the ADF, with particular consequences for officers. A growing list of corporate governance and administrative demands has succeeded in putting the officer back in the

office. Low appetites for risk at the highest level of command and excessive reporting requirements have trickled through the officer corps. Officers no longer independently assess the risk of activities they run, they dutifully fill out a military risk measurement matrix that spits out 100 PowerPoint slides and refers them to a one-star for approval. Increasingly, process has been substituted for problem-solving in the Australian Army. In a Norman Dixon-esque quest for perfection, process is implemented to try to eliminate error and poor judgement. Consider how many staff officers and processes sit between tactical commanders in Afghanistan and the Chief of the Defence Force in Canberra, how many overlapping command chains and stakeholders all require routine reporting. This bureaucratisation has also been driven by wider cultural trends at play in advanced militaries around the world, including the shift from institutionalism to occupationalism. US researchers found that by using common civilian management policies and techniques the US Army 'turned into a bureaucracy where people were focused on technique, not goals; on self-advancement, not group loyalty; on the career, not tradition and on their own futures, not policy.'¹¹ In addition, a risk-averse bureaucratic culture has also shaped the nature of many of our staff jobs. I have seen decorated combat officers who have led companies in Afghanistan struggle to muster the authority to make a room booking in their subsequent staff posting. Our military has a higher ratio of senior officers to soldiers than peers in the US, UK, New Zealand or Canada.¹² Bureaucratisation is reflected in the way our officers write — seldom and carefully to avoid the possibility of being wrong. Increasing bureaucracy in Army is deadening the skills of many of our officers, pushing them into postings where they perform largely menial and clerical tasks and forget their core professional skills of risk assessment and action. And the demand to shift Army officers into bureaucratic postings is relentless; the ADF now has enough headquarters office space in the ACT alone to fill half the Pentagon, yet it is 3% the size of the US military. Creeping bureaucracy across the ADF is making our officers even greyer.

So what to do about it? The first thing to do is to confirm whether the culture of the officer corps is in fact changing. These initial observations of current officer culture need to be tested using data analysis, interviews and self-assessment by officers. Second, the Australian Army should decide whether its officer culture should be changed and determine how this can be achieved. Changing a military culture is difficult, but not impossible. After disastrous errors in officer judgement contributed to Dutch military inaction in the face of the Srebrenica massacre in 1995, the Netherlands reviewed its officer culture in detail. It concluded that an 'up or out' promotion policy was essential to 'renew the officer corps and change some aspects of the current culture such as risk-avoidance, conservatism and

bureaucracy'.¹³ Samuel Huntington outlines five touchstones by which military professionalism can be gauged: entry standards, promotions, character of the military education system, the nature of the military staff, and the esprit and competence of the officer corps. It is at these touchstones that any serious effort to accurately gauge the essence of an officer corps culture should begin, and where any effort to reform the culture should be directed. Our long-held belief in egalitarianism, the prevalence of the natural soldier myth, and the march of bureaucracy are all combining to shape an increasingly formatted culture within our officer corps. Our officers are returning from operational service with little tolerance for poor performance to find a service in which 'being grey' is perfectly satisfactory. Left in its current state, officer culture can continue to be shaped by largely unexamined factors — or, better still, the Australian Army should shape the kind of officer culture it wants to have a decade from now. ■

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ENDNOTES

- 1 Data provided to author by Defence People Group indicates that 4764 (78%) of Australian Army officers have no degree, 22% have a graduate or post-graduate degree, 13.6 years is the average length of service, and between 2003 and 2013 an average of 15% of officers were drawn from the other ranks (57% joined through ADFA/RMC, 17% from the Reserve). Email Defence Media Ops to author, 4 April 2013.
- 2 Edgar Schien, *Organizational Culture and Leadership* (3rd edn), Jossey Bass, San Francisco, 2004.
- 3 Nick Jans and J.M. Frazer-Jans, 'Culture and Organisational Behaviour at Australian Defence Headquarters', *Australian Defence Force Journal*, No. 158, 2003, pp. 23–28.
- 4 Schmidtchen particularly cautions that this should be carefully assessed in David Schmidtchen, 'Generational Differences and Other Marketing Myths', *Australian Army Review* 3, 2006, pp. 179–96.
- 5 US Army War College, Study on Military Professionalism (1970) at: www.carlisle.army.mil/usawc/dclm/pdf/study1970.pdf
- 6 M.L. Phelps, 'The Australian Army's Culture: From Institutional Warrior to Pragmatic Professional', *Australian Defence Force Journal*, No. 123, 1997, pp. 37–43.
- 7 Colonel Mart De Kruif, *Officership in the US Army and the Royal Netherlands Army: A Comparison for Improvement*, US Army War College Strategy Research Project paper, 2003.
- 8 Nick Jans and J. M. Frazer-Jans, 'Job rotation and military capability: benefits, certainly – but is anyone counting the cost?', *Australian Defence Force Journal*, No. 146, Jan/Feb 2001, pp. 47–59.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Lieutenant Colonel H. Bondy, 'Personality Type and Military Culture in the Anglo-West', *Australian Defence Force Journal*, No. 169, 2005, pp. 4–14.
- 11 Richard A. Gabriel and Paul L. Savage, *Crisis in Command*, Hill and Wang, New York, 1978, p. 57.
- 12 Author's analysis.
- 13 Den Haag, Royal Netherlands Chief of Staff of the Army, *De officierscultuur in de KL.*, 2002, p. 7.