Sometimes it's good to fail – a British perspective

by Karl Hickman

Resumé

Arméer, förband och individer fokuserar av lätt förklarliga skäl på att vinna. Men vad händer om man misslyckas? Tesen i denna artikel är att militära utövare inte alltid ger misslyckandet den uppmärksamhet som fenomenet förtjänar, och det av såväl systematiska och filosofiska som personliga orsaker. Men att misslyckas är faktiskt viktigt. Inte bara på grund av dess omedelbara konsekvenser. Ett misslyckande kan nämligen driva på anpassning och flexibilitet i krig, och, i små portioner, kan det också förbättra den moraliska och organisatoriska robustheten som är nödvändig för en sådan anpassning. Därför behöver ett misslyckande undersökas mycket noggrant, bl a dess fysiska, konceptuella och moraliska aspekter. Vi behöver bli mer bekväma med tanken på att vi kan misslyckas, både under övningar med förband och ute i missioner, och se ett misslyckande som en oundviklig del av våra professionella och personliga liv.

WHAT IS YOUR idea of a soldier? In recent years, society has tended to view soldiers as either heroes, doing things that most of the population would not wish to do, or as victims of conflict or misguided strategies, policies or politics. Within the military, the situation is more nuanced and there is frustration with these simplistic categorisations. Yet even though the vast majority of soldiers baulk at the idea of being described as 'heroes', the ethos within most military organisations emphasises physical and moral strength, strong leadership and winning at all costs.

Rightly so. Given the lethality of current weapons systems and the ease with which they can be targeted, the margins between success and catastrophic failure are less today than ever before. Winning is not simply a desirable outcome but an absolute necessity in operations, even if our understanding of what winning means has changed considerably in recent years given our experiences of counterinsurgency and stability operations. When you consider that armies also seek to attract strong, charismatic leaders and decision makers, you end up with organisations for whom the idea of winning is a raison d'etre as well as a matter of practical necessity and of military cohesion.

But what about the idea that you might fail? Not only the idea that you might fail collectively but that you might fail as an individual? Militaries (like all bureaucracies) are extremely good in shrugging off failure by concluding that everyone and no one is to blame. But what about the idea that both leaders and followers can react unfavourably to the reality of operations and therefore make decisions that will lead to defeat or (further) losses? With the emphasis on winning at all costs, I would argue that there has been little serious analysis of the reasons and processes that determine collective and individual failure.

Historians often examine military failure, particularly organisational flaws and the personalities of the key leaders in charge. But there is far less self-analysis and reflection of why and how individuals in armies *today* might fail; and even less opportunity for that to take place in training. After Iraq and Afghanistan, some in the British Army (including at the top of the organisation) have explicitly stated that this needs to change. However, busy organisations are often only able to focus on a few things at once and there remain, in my view, both systemic and philosophical reasons why failure is neither studied effectively nor given the respect that it deserves.

This paper will argue that we should focus on failure as well as victory and suggest ways in which this might be achieved. We should plan for success whilst having a healthy respect for our potential enemies and whilst preparing for failure. Failure is hard to stomach: it is shocking, sudden, and often wholly unpredictable. It can create physical, conceptual and moral shock. At the end of the day, that is what it is meant to do! Human frailty and moral uncertainty will remain part of the human condition and therefore an inherent part of conflict in the future. So, we need to learn about and practice with failure to a much greater extent than we to now: openly, bravely and with the humility, realism and professional curiosity that it deserves.

Why we avoid failure

Positive thinking, bravery, lethal technology, firepower, 'smashing' your opponent are all phrases associated with the military. Who wants to think about the opposite: fear, uncertainty, shock and moral collapse? We practice casualty evacuation drills and we reassure soldiers that they will receive swift

attention on the battlefield should the worst happen. We simulate death and horrific injury in training but can we replicate the feelings and urges that go with it: anger, sadness, fear, the feeling of helplessness or the desire to help that may endanger others? These things are often skipped over in training and were only looked at in an ad hoc manner once operations Iraq and Afghanistan were already underway. Some now state that operations against more effective opponents than the Taleban and Iraqi insurgents will leave little room for the high standard of casualty evacuation seen recently, even though western militaries are now so small that significant casualties rapidly become political-strategic issues.

And yet most of those who study conflict today agree with Clausewitz that warfare remains a profoundly human activity, despite the presence of more and more lethal technology. It stands to reason therefore, that conflict will also remain the arena of human frailty as well as human strength, with victory (or otherwise) often determined by our ability to suppress our frailties and emphasise our strengths. So why do we not study human frailty more? The difficult truth, I would argue, is that armies – both collectively and individually – deny and/or suppress the notion that frailty can or should be discussed.

Firstly, institutional and personal arrogance refuses to admit that we/I is anything other than strong; or if not invulnerable, at least better than all those others that I compete with. Leadership that emphasises elitism without humility revels in this notion, particularly leadership that claims superiority over other organisations and blames others for failures. Secondly, personal insecurities lead individuals to avoid exposing weakness for fear that it will have a detrimental effect

on career, reputation with peers and superiors, and even one's own self-image. This is just as true for the hard-man Corporal who is the strongest and fittest in the Company as it is for the unit commander or the general whose reports over the past 30 years have told him that he is the best thing to happen to the Army in a long time. Finally, there is avoidance strategy, where insights into weakness are ignored or pushed aside for another time because "we are busy, we have other things to think about and real and concrete tasks that need to be achieved." This is often reinforced by training systems that emphasise the mastering of drills and procedures (often for laudable reasons) over reflection and experimentation.

Interestingly, one area where this is not the case is with military padres. All religions have analysed the human condition and usually emphasise the need for humility (as well as faith, prayer etc.) in the presence of our very human flaws. Similarly, an ever-increasing body research is now looking at the processes behind combat stress, though conclusive findings have yet to be reached. Yet as military professionals, we often deny the existence of frailty, at least publicly. "That's one for the padre (and thank God it is you and not me)". And yet, in our heart of hearts we have all failed at some time or other, both collectively and individually. Furthermore, most people who have been on operations know that failure is an inherent part of conflict, even in the context of success overall. Some may hope that surgical capabilities, real-time intelligence and real-time exploitation may make the idea of 'zero collateral' operations a possibility, if only we can align our strategy with our plans, procedures and drills. But anyone who has not had the benefit of surprise, mobility and excellent intelligence, and who has perhaps

taken casualties as a result, will know that the enemy gets a vote too.

Despite this, armies in recent times (and perhaps always) have demonstrated little by way of preparation for failure, either conceptually, physically or morally. Other than the rehearsal of casualty evacuation drills, dealing with failure is very rarely practiced in conceptual training, even if it is occasionally discussed. Reserves are almost always used to exploit success rather than prevent failure, while contingency plans are never enacted, remaining exercises in staff planning. Physically, real casualties often affect the ability to continue manoeuvre operations but battle casualty replacements are usually only practiced (for real) on operations. Most importantly, both individuals and groups are not sufficiently prepared morally for the experience of failure, despite some efforts by commanders with foresight to initiate seminars on the subject.

Why is failure important?

Even if failure is an under-emphasised area, you may well feel that other areas nevertheless require greater prominence. However, I suggest that the study *and practice* of failure is vital. Firstly, because failure best drives positive change and encourages sufficient flexibility to adapt and overcome. And secondly, because the experience of failure generally strengthens our moral robustness and therefore ability to withstand future shocks, thereby creating the time and space for adaption to take place. The importance of failure in strengthening our robustness and in generating the flexibility of mind necessary for adaptation is why organisations that are serious about winning should also be serious about failure.

Failure in driving adaptation and flexibility

We learn best from failure. Failure is visceral and leaves a permanent mark. We all remember when we have failed, although some display an extraordinary ability to suppress failure and continue on. Yet if personal failure sticks, it's worth considering briefly why lessons learned during operations (both successes and failures) are often not well retained outside the individuals or groups who experienced them first-hand. Much of this is already well understood. The lessons-capture process has improved in recent years in the British Army. However, there is often insufficient time for reflection and analysis by those involved, while the secondary audience is often busy learning other drills and procedures that are either believed to be important or, worse, are imposed by higher formations without sufficient thought and taken on without question. There is also often a failure to adequately 'resource' lessons, either with money, training, doctrine, or a combination of all three. Lessons that are discussed but not resourced are lost within a matter of months.

And yet we know that the ability to learn from both success and failure and then adapt (and innovate) in war is often decisive, as any study of the British and German experiences on the Western Front from 1916 onwards will show.[1] The force that is victorious is the one that remains on the battlefield (physically or metaphorically) at the end, not necessarily the one who is successful in the beginning. Therefore, the logic of openly and honestly studying failure as well as success should be inescapable, not least as it is a sign of a flexible mind; a mind that is also sufficiently humble and self-aware to see the opportunities in any apparent or real setback.

Failure in strengthening moral and organisational robustness

As important as learning from failure is the idea that the experience of failure can help us deal with future shocks. Clearly, catastrophic failure can have the opposite effect and we should do everything to avoid it. The legacy of catastrophic failure and the search for the reasons why can linger for years and affect whole generations, often leading to flawed analysis and the learning of false lessons as a result. The German experience of strategic failure on the Western Front in 1918 is a good example of this. Hindenburg and Ludendorff no doubt created the dolkstoss-legend (the myth of the 'stab in the back' by elements on the home front) partly to defend their record of tactical adaptation which had achieved many tactical successes. However, this could not hide a clear failure to understand and adapt more quickly than the Allies to the strategic realities of the war.

Failure that falls short of being catastrophic is nonetheless both traumatic and a true test of character and robustness. Violence directed at a ruthless enemy is one thing and can even provide the adrenalin so many soldiers seek. But violence that kills or maims your friends, colleagues and innocent civilians is another. Failure, in particular the experience of casualties and fatalities, can, for example, express itself collectively in a reluctance to continue certain important activities such as patrolling; and individually in extreme fear reactions and the inability to make decisions under pressure. My experience is that those who have a very strong and unrealistic self-image, who would never admit to failure, are often those who suffer most when the 'bubble' bursts and the reality of casualties and the ruthlessness of the enemy becomes suddenly, unavoidably apparent.

Yet while failure is a true test of one's moral character and reserves, I would also argue that –for most and unpleasant though it is – the experience of failure (some way short of catastrophic defeat) makes individuals and organisations more robust, at least in the short and medium term. The term 'battle-hardened' is well-known but is, in a sense, insufficient. While guilt at surviving may remain an important factor in the background, there are also many positive aspects: the feeling of having dealt with extreme situations, heightened understanding of your own and others strengths and weaknesses; and a more humble and balanced understanding of your place in the world. Not least, failure can also teach you that your reaction to trauma must be to focus on what you can do to improve the situation overall rather than succumb to panic or hopelessness, even if all indications point in that direction. This ability to find the good in any situation is an underrated area of our profession, despite all the talk of positive thinking.

Training for failure

There are a number of methods that we can use to improve our ability to learn from and deal with failure during our training and preparation for operations. Firstly, we need to give the enemy the opportunity to act. Bringing an element of chance and unpredictability into training provides the friction that the enemy creates in reality, not just the friction created by getting to the line of departure on time or organising ourselves effectively for an attack. So, let's get away from the idea of a pre-scripted, chronological list of training serials. Too often – and it is already well recognised – training is a rehearsal of staff procedures and drills, both of which are very important but which must

also eventually be tested against a thinking enemy. Too often, exercises insist on success and condemn failure; too often rehearsals simply confirm the brilliance of the commander's plan.

Wargaming and 'free-play' enemy offers an important opportunity to bring chance and friction into training; but we must also go further. We must create both the time and the physical and intellectual environment to exercise to the point of failure and beyond, but with the understanding that failure is o k (or even desirable) in training and that it is to be expected on operations. Why would failure be a desirable outcome in training? Because it would give us the ability to rerun failure to see what happened and how it might be avoided in the future. Because it would create the conditions for experimentation (and adaptation) and would foster an approach to training that is humble about the chances of success, constantly seeks opportunities and has the self-confidence to try out alternatives without fear of sanction.

Together with changing the way we train, we should also adopt a more rigorous lesson learning process, both 'quick and dirty' and longer term analysis of success and failure. If we are serious about learning lessons, then we also need to resource them: with money, time and thought.

Finally, we need to focus much more on the moral component, including a more in-depth understanding of the effects of failure on character and on decision-making processes. In step with our more open societies, we should continue to be more open and discursive about these issues. You can only simulate death and injury to some extent but we need to talk about it and practice how we will deal with it, particularly in terms of the effects on individuals and group dynamics. One small example of this would be to analyse and discuss how the stages of griev-

ing manifest themselves over time. Another would be to come to a better professional understanding of the effect of fear on unit cohesion.[2] Similarly, we need to practice recovery from failure in our training. When was the last time you were asked to practice a rearward passage of lines at only 60 % combat effectiveness? When was the last training event where your deputy's deputy took over your role?

Conclusion

The reality of conflict and operations, which is rarely admitted in public, is that soldiers not only kill *but are killed*. If we are honest and admit that we will sometimes be surprised by an attack that an enemy initiates, then we will need robustness to survive the shocks inflicted; and flexibility to understand what is happening, learn the lessons (of failure), adapt and ultimately succeed. Throughout, individual and organisational robustness will be needed to withstand further shocks (which there will surely be) as we go through the process of adaptation along with our

opponent. This in itself raises important questions about the value of mass as well as our mental approach to failure. As Christopher Tuck notes, "mass…can be the foundation of adaptability and the ability to insulate oneself from the shocks of war".[3]

The trick, of course, is to adapt faster than the enemy, to use but not permanently rely on your robustness to see you through that process of adaptation before enemy action starts breaking down your organisation and your decision-making processes. As we survey multiple threat scenarios, this is surely just as relevant today as it was for the soldiers who fought in the maelstrom of the First World War. It is also difficult, not least as there is currently no single threat that can definitely serve as the basis for adaptation.[4] Nevertheless, learning from and dealing with failure should be at the heart of our training as we seek to build robust and flexible organisations that can eventually prevail.

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Notes

1. For example, see Foley, Robert T.: "Dumb donkeys or cunning foxes? Learning in the British and German armies during the Great War", *International Affairs* 90: 2, 2014, pp. 279-298. Foley also distinguished between adaptation and innovation.
2. For an excellent analysis of the effects of fear see Daddis, Gregory A.: "Understanding Fear's Effect on Unit Effectiveness", *Military Review* 84: 4, July-August 2004, pp. 22-27.
3. Tuck, Christopher: *Understanding Land Warfare*, Routledge, London and New York 2014, p. 213. See also p. 118 on the huge organization challenges of adapting whilst fighting.
4. Ibid., p. 225.