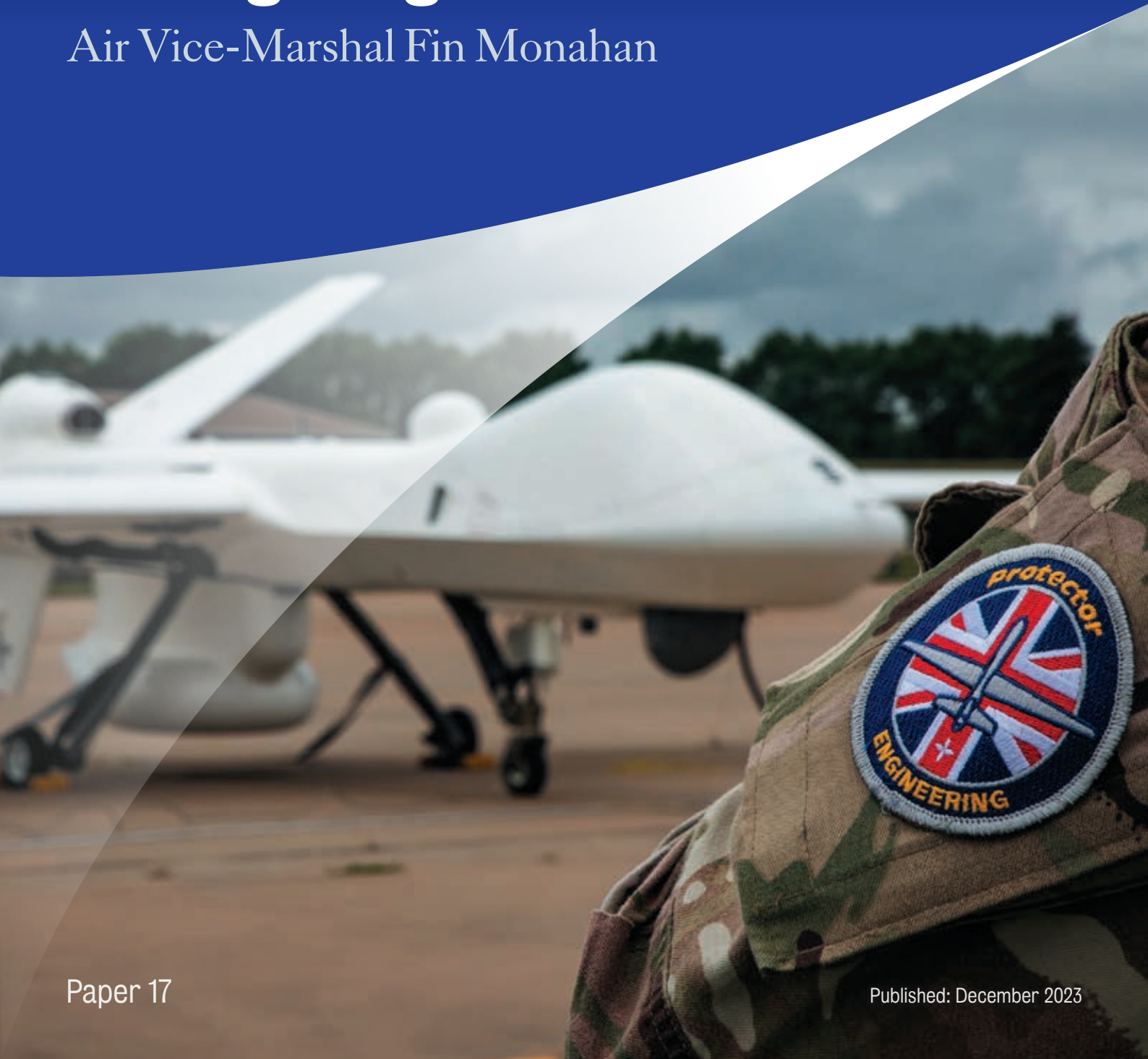King's
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Military Culture and Fighting Power

Air Vice-Marshal Fin Monahan

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About the Author

Doctor Air Vice-Marshal Fin Monahan OBE DFC PhD is a serving officer in the Royal Air Force and is currently the Director of the UK Defence think tank, the Development Concepts and Doctrine Centre, known as DCDC. Fin's PhD examined the origins of RAF Culture. He has a deep interest in the aspects of culture that underpin (or undermine) the fighting power and efficiency of military organisations. A pilot, his main aircraft was the Harrier. He has flown on operations and exercises around the world from sea and from land. All views in this article are his own.

Abstract

The ongoing Russo-Ukrainian War has brought to stark relief the enduring role of military culture in modern warfare. The contrast in the battlefield performance of a resolute and cohesive Ukrainian military versus their numerically and materially advantaged Russian invaders highlighted how culturally strong military forces perform better on the battlefield. Concurrently, research demonstrates how strong cultures can become so entrenched that they hinder change, conceptual thinking, modernisation and innovation. As the UK faces an increasingly unpredictable international system, balancing tradition and modernisation has become an increasingly important challenge to overcome in the current evolving security landscape.

This is an updated version of this article including a number of minor formatting revisions.

'Culture is the bedrock of military effectiveness… history has shown that even when military forces have had access to the same technology, whether they developed the doctrine to use that technology effectively or not was largely a function of each force's culture'.[1]

Introduction

The fighting in Ukraine highlights that, even in this era of space and cyber technologies, UAVs, open-source intelligence, mass data and long-range fires, warfare remains a brutal contest of wills between adversaries in which the culture of the protagonists continues to play a central role. The Ukrainian forces' resolve, courage and fighting spirit have contrasted with poor morale and corruption within the numerically superior and initially better-equipped invading Russians. The difference in military cultures doubtless played a role in Russia being repulsed, against the odds, in the first stages of the conflict. Examples of culture playing a role in battlefield, campaigns, and entire conflicts are evident throughout the history of warfare: Thermopylae, Agincourt, The US War of Independence, Little Round Top, the Battle of Britain, Vietnam, the Falklands and Afghanistan provide us with examples in which military culture likely played a significant role in determining the outcome. In 2018, Fowler provided quantitative evidence that 'culturally advantaged forces tend to exact higher tolls from their enemy than materially or institutionally advantaged ones alone'.[2] However, he also found that 'western democracy does not represent the ideal cultural profile for battlefield success'.[3] Fowler's research is worthy of consideration for Western militaries as they consider how best to train their personnel to prepare them for warfare.

Military organisations exhibit particularly complex webs of tradition, processes and practices, symbols, history, and written and unwritten cultural rules and codes of conduct. Elizabeth Kier wrote that 'few organizations devote as many resources as possible to the assimilation of their members. The emphasis on ceremony and tradition, and the development of a common language and *esprit de corps*, testify to the strength of the military's organizational culture'.[4] These deep cultural traits contribute to beliefs, biases, and behaviours demonstrated by recent RAF Culture Team research to underpin (or undermine) fighting power.[5] However, strong cultures can also become so entrenched that they hinder change, conceptual thinking, modernisation and innovation.[6] Organisational culture is also the root cause of bureaucratic gridlocks, systemic failings, groupthink, breaches of discipline, and corrosive behaviours. Getting the cultural balance right is challenging but is extremely important to battlefield outcomes.

Although used extensively in civilian companies, organisational cultural practices and theory have not been harnessed systematically across UK Defence or within professional military education.[7] Our military culture is not something we should take for granted. It plays an essential role in the outcomes of conflict. It is something we need to understand, and given that the UK is a liberal democracy, our military culture is also something we need to work particularly hard at and invest in if we seek to secure success in future conflict.

What is organisational culture?

Organisational culture is perhaps less the bedrock of military effectiveness and more like an opaque and gritty jelly in which we operate. It is hard to see through. It is in constant flux and infused with challenges.

Spencer-Oatey defined culture as 'a fuzzy set of basic assumptions and values, orientations to life, beliefs, policies, procedures and conventions that a group of people share'.[8] Bower of Mckinsey and Company provided a pithier explanation that conveys the omnipresent quality of organisational culture as 'the way we do things around here'.[9]

Kirke, a British Army Officer and anthropologist specialising in military culture, highlighted the pervasive nature of culture within a military organisation, noting that it 'exists between the ears of the people of the group', and is a 'very insidious... force informing our behaviour'.[10] For military organisations, culture informs almost everything, including organisational structures, social constructs, artefacts, symbols, processes, practices, Command and Control (C2), buildings, routine orders, warfighting doctrine, standard operating procedures, regulations, and rituals. It also shapes unofficial rituals, written and unwritten rules, slang, humour, off-duty socialising, unofficial dress codes, counter-institutional behaviour, rule-breaking, criminal behaviour, and the disciplinary system.

The power of culture is a consideration that will be highlighted throughout this paper. Kilmann, Sexton and Sirpa described culture in an organisation as 'the invisible force behind the tangibles and observables in any organisation, a social energy that moves people to act'.[11] Schein similarly highlighted the power of culture within an organisation: 'culture is an abstraction, yet forces that are created in social and organizational situations that derive from culture are powerful. If we don't understand the operation of those forces, we become victims to them.'[12] While the gritty jelly of organisational culture is important to any organisation, it is imperative to a military organisation that requires its people to overcome the visceral fear of combat and to outmatch the adversary to protect the nation. The Roundel Model is a tool developed to explain, assess, and harness an organisation's culture (or sub-cultures) and is particularly useful for exploring the organisational culture of a military organisation.[13]
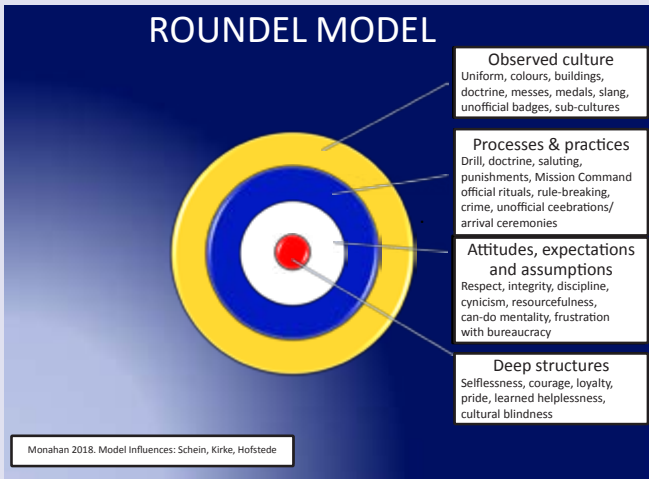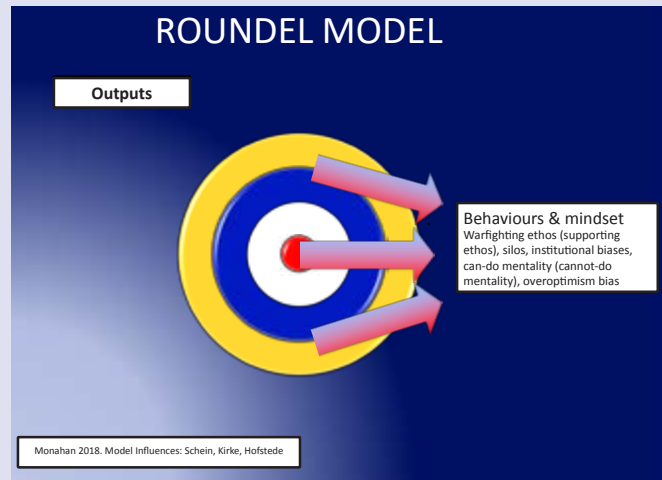
Figure 1 – The Roundel Model
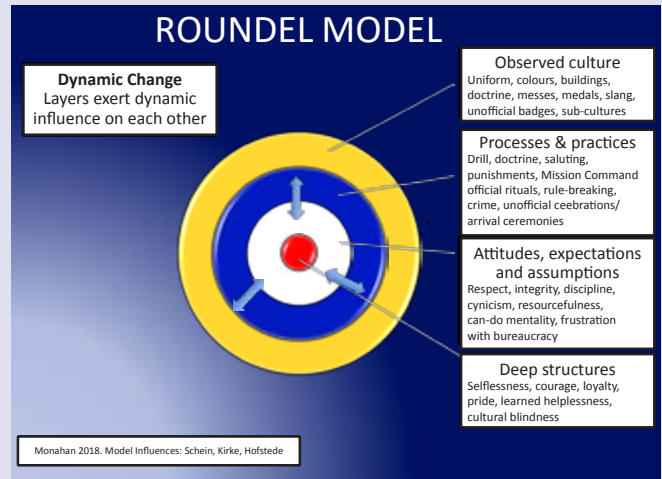
Figure 2 – Dynamic Interaction between the layers
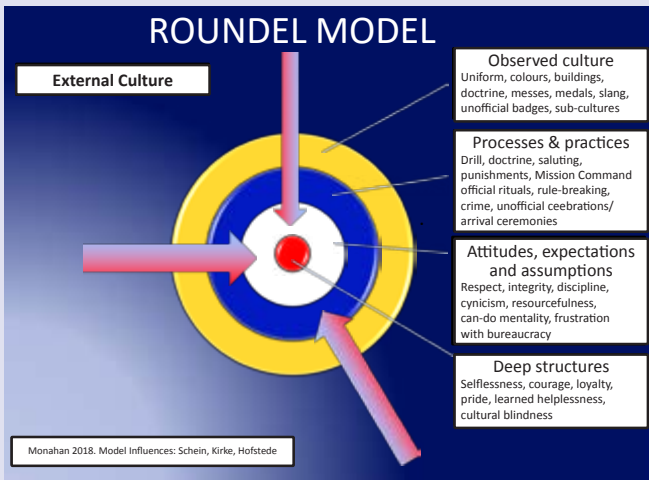
Figure 3 – The input of external culture

Figure 4 – Outputs: Behaviours and Mindsets

A Model for Explaining Culture – The Roundel Model

The Roundel Model breaks the complex culture of a military organisation down into more easily understood layers. However, its real value is as a tool that allows the researcher to explore the links between observed culture, processes, practices, and structures within a military organisation and the behaviours and biases that emerge from this complex web. The model can map contributors and barriers to organisational effectiveness and fighting power.

Observed Culture

The outer layer includes the most obvious artefacts of culture, examples include uniforms, Colours, unit crests or badges, buildings, messes, doctrine, and official websites, as well as informal aspects such as unofficial badges, t-shirts and merchandise, informal magazines, as well as blogs and websites. This also includes the unofficial off-duty 'uniforms', hairstyles, and personal grooming, often indicators of sub-cultures and silos within military organisations.

Processes and Practices

The blue layer in the model represents the organisation's official and unofficial processes and practices. These include the rituals and traditions of an organisation that can be obvious to an outsider, such as parades, saluting, and flypasts. The less obvious official daily processes and practices undertaken in a military organisation are often not considered for their contribution to military ethos or fighting spirit. However, research by the author and the RAF Culture Team has identified a strong link between daily processes and practices and their effect on deeper layers of culture, fighting power, and military effectiveness.[14]

Unofficial processes, practices, and unwritten rules created by the people also profoundly contribute to this blue layer of culture. For example, humour and slang are creations of the people and are constantly evolving; research has shown that both aspects play an important role in embedding culture and underpinning fighting power but can easily slide into corrosive and counter-cultural leadership challenges.[15] Similarly, unofficial rituals such as arrival ceremonies reside within this layer. Much like slang and humour, these are the people's creations, often occurring over many years. Most unofficial rituals encourage cohesion, teamwork, and pride. However, they are also a source of bullying, harassment, and reputational damage to the organisation.

Attitudes, expectations and assumptions

The white layer of culture is not visible. It includes the attitudes, expectations, and assumptions common across the organisation or within its subcultures and silos. As people spend more time within the organisation, these traits become stronger. For the analysis of culture to be effective, this layer's positive and negative aspects must be considered.

Deep structures

With time, attitudes, expectations, and assumptions can become so reinforced in a military organisation that they become deep structures: immutable beliefs and values, represented by the red centre of the model.

Dynamic interaction

Figure 2 shows that there is a dynamic interaction between the layers. The two outer layers play a strong role in influencing the inner two. However, a feedback loop also exists in which the deep structures, attitudes, expectations, and assumptions create cultural biases and behaviours that influence choices and activities in the outer layers.

External cultural pressures

Figure 3 shows that military culture is influenced by broader societal culture. Kier referred to militaries as 'total' cultures, suggesting that members of such organisations live out their lives exclusively behind the wire of their military stations, cantonments and bases.[16] However, in the case of the UK, there has always been a significant interaction between military personnel and broader society, which strongly influences military culture.[17] For example, trends in military uniforms, hairstyles, and facial hair from the 1700s to the present day have been affected by external fashions. In recent years, lifestyle changes have made this influence more pronounced. In the UK, increased car and home ownership have given military personnel much greater mobility and freedom, resulting in less time spent on military camps and bases than their forebears. Meanwhile, the digital revolution has altered how personnel spend their leisure time in the evenings on military bases and how they interact with each other, allowing them to maintain strong links with their civilian families and friends.

Behaviours and mindset

Figure 4 shows examples of the behaviours and mindsets that emerge from the layers shown in the model. Training approaches developed over centuries, combined with deeply embedded processes and practices backed up by a military disciplinary system, resulting in these becoming deeply entrenched among military personnel. This can have both positive and negative consequences.

Cultural changes since the Cold War

Gradual but dramatic changes to the cultural base of the UK armed forces have occurred since the end of the Cold War. Downsizing, civilianisation, contractorisation, and the introduction of Private Finance Initiatives have placed pressure on aspects of culture that contribute to fighting power. This period saw budgetary strains on messes, infrastructure, and training programmes. Meanwhile, military hospitals were shut down, families' quarters sold, recruiting partially contracted out, and the 'Pay-as-You Dine' system was introduced alongside broader contracted retail 'solutions' for social and shopping facilities on bases. These changes took place in parallel to significant societal transformations, including increased home ownership, greater mobility of personnel, and a shift in approaches to equality and diversity, further intensifying changes to our cultural base. Meanwhile, the internet has democratised access to information and introduced major transformations to how personnel socialise and live. During this same period, society has become more litigious, demanding greater visibility and accountability of public services, resulting in risk aversion that will be dealt with later.

Cumulative change has occurred across the entire web of organisational culture, significantly reshaping service life since the end of the Cold War. However, the operational impact of these changes has been somewhat masked by the nature of the military activities during this period, being mainly expeditionary and conducted at times and intensities of our choosing. It has, therefore, been possible to focus efforts on mentally attuning our personnel for combat during pre-deployment training. However, with an increased threat of state-on-state warfare, there is a need to return to a broader readiness to fight in preparation for high-end warfare and to have an 'always on' approach. Our entire organisation must be ready to fight in high-end warfare abroad and potentially from UK bases, ports, and barracks. The Haythornthwaite Review underlined this importance: 'there is no doubting the individual courage and commitment of those in the UK Armed Forces, but will the people-system at the heart of our military capability work when tested? Will it still have the strength, agility, skill, adaptability and resolve we have seen from the Ukrainian Armed Forces, or will that core prove hollow?'[18] We must ensure that our cultural base is revitalised; this does not mean a simple return to a Cold War mindset; the context is different. We must examine our military culture against how we intend to fight to ensure successful battlefield and strategic outcomes.

Why is military organisational culture important?

UK Defence must deliver sufficient physical, cognitive and virtual fighting power to fulfil the organisation's purpose of defending the nation and helping it to prosper. This is enshrined in the UK Defence and NATO doctrines and comprises physical, conceptual, and moral components (See Figure 5).[19] UK doctrine considers that 'each component mutually supports and informs the other'.[20] This aligns with Fuller's view that 'human force is threefold: it is mental, moral and physical, but none of these forms of force can be expended without influencing the other two'.[21] While NATO accords equal status to these components, the UK considers the moral part pre-eminent. It explains how forces inferior in numbers and equipment can still muster the fighting power necessary to win, apparently against the odds.[22]

The importance of what we now refer to as the moral component of fighting power has been recognised for centuries in the British military psyche and has traditionally been articulated as *élan*, fighting spirit, or warfighting ethos. The emphasis has predominantly been on preparing personnel for fighting at the tactical level of warfare. However, recent research by a small group of military personnel and academics has identified a need for organisational culture to be considered much more broadly to examine its systemic effect across the entire apparatus of UK Defence.[23] Reflecting this, an expanded approach to culture was incorporated into UK doctrine for the first time in December 2023 and is described as follows:

> 'The deep and distinctive organisational cultures of Defence have emerged and evolved over centuries. Comprising complex traditions, practices, organisational structures, artefacts and unwritten norms, our cultures underpin effective fighting power and our warfighting ethos. But they are also the cause of deep-seated behaviours and cognitive biases across all ranks and grades in Defence such as groupthink, tribalism, 'can-do' mentality, presentism, cultural blindness, and consent and evade mindsets. This can hinder change and innovation and often contributes to poor decision-making, breaches of discipline, unacceptable behaviours, systemic and human failings that lead to errors, incidents and accidents. Defence also contributes to changes in wider national strategic culture. As Defence adapts at pace, we must safeguard positive aspects of our organisational culture while seeking to identify and change those that hold us back'.[24]
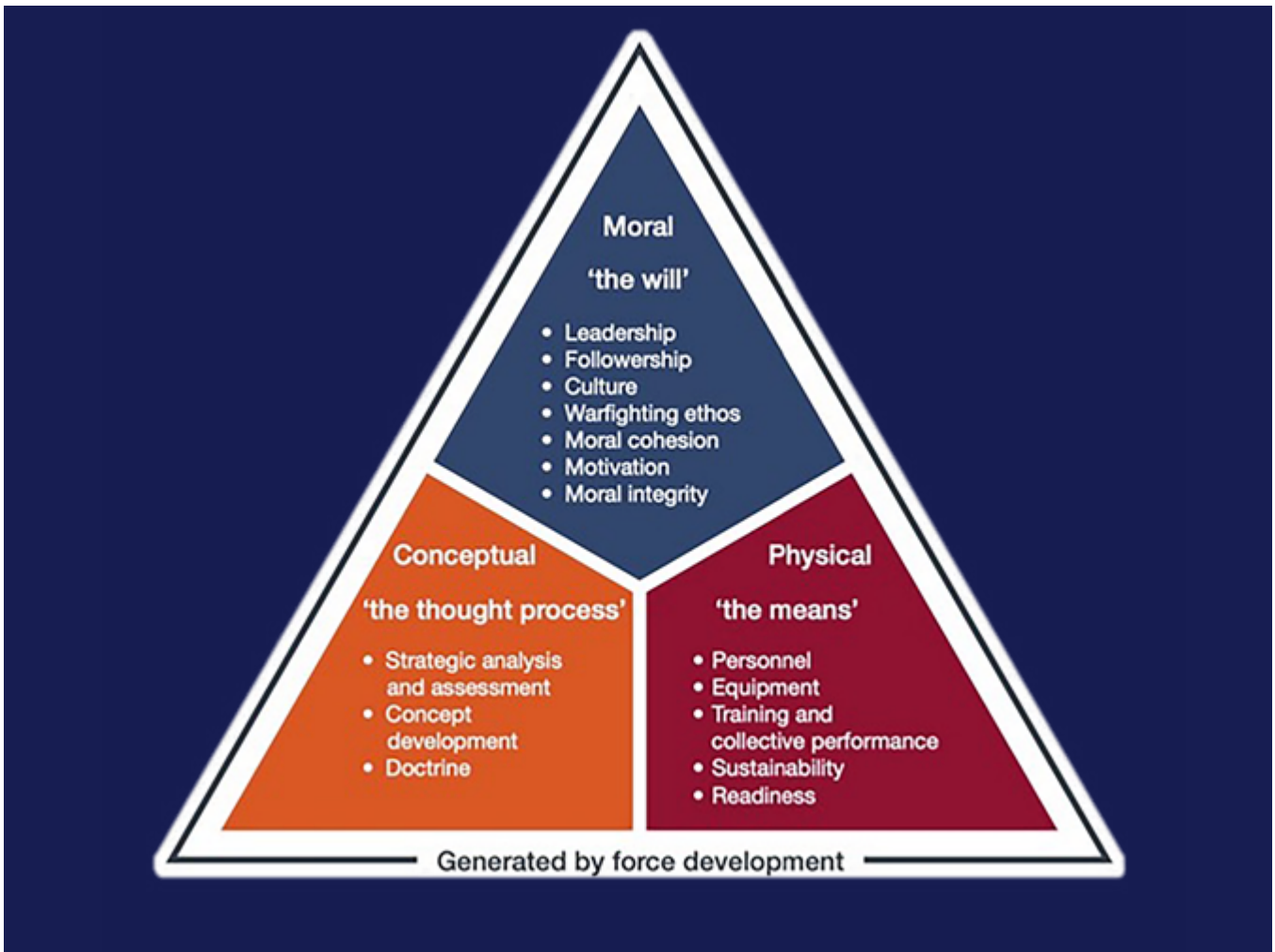
Figure 5 – The Three Components of Fighting Power

Despite recognition of the link between culture and fighting power in UK Defence Doctrine, this is still an emerging area of consideration, especially the aspects of culture across UK Defence where links to fighting power are not immediately apparent. Fowler's research found that 'culture's absence from meaningful definitions of military power results in world leaders, military commanders, and learned scholars making important political, operational, and theoretical decisions with only partial information. Put plainly, decision-makers cannot accurately assess the martial capabilities of themselves or others without accounting for culture. Consequently, national leaders likely perceive threats where none exists; ignore threats that truly matter; place great trust in incapable allies and turn away competent help. Moreover, this ignorance of what truly matters in combat means that much of a state's potential military capability remains untapped and left to happenstance'.[25]

Analysis of organisational culture enables a systems approach that holistically examines cultural attributes and activities across an organisation. This allows them to be linked to the overall output of an organisation. For UK Defence, this is fighting power. As UK Defence adapts and modernises, organisational culture is an area ripe for research and application, both academically and in developing future warfighting concepts.

Next steps

Culture impacts almost everything we do and the outcomes we achieve. The following areas are particularly worthy of consideration when set against the current challenges faced by UK Defence:

Culture and mindset

Culture has been shown to play an essential role in all three components of fighting power, but its role underpinning the moral component is especially clear.[26] Centuries of evolution of the UK's armed forces contribute to a strong warfighting ethos that is subtly different for each service. The armed forces are clear of the value of this, and warfighting ethos is described in the UK Defence Doctrine as follows:

> 'Warfighting ethos is the characteristic spirit of the cultures of our Armed Forces manifested in our attitudes and aspirations. It provides us with the vital moral, emotional and spiritual capacity to overcome fear and cope with war's visceral and highly ambiguous nature.[27]

Adoption of uncrewed and autonomous systems, cyber and space technologies and information operations require different qualities compared to more traditional methods of warfare. Adapting military culture following the emergence of new technology has been done before. Henderson, Sykes, Trenchard, and Seuter consciously adapted the ethos of the Royal Flying Corps, Royal Naval Air Service and then the Royal Air Force to a new way of fighting with the emergence of the aeroplane.[28] Sykes wrote of the Royal Flying Corps:

> '...all was new. A new Corp. A new element in which to work... And there had to be developed a new spirit combining the discipline of the old Army, the technical skill of the Navy and the initiative, energy and dash inseparable from flying... *Esprit de corps* was of vital importance, but as officers and non-commissioned officers were drawn from every branch and every regiment of the Army this was no easy matter'.[29]

Meanwhile, a 1919 Memorandum entitled 'The Permanent Organization of the Royal Air Force' written by Trenchard with a foreword by Churchill, highlighted that 'firstly, to create an Air Force worthy of the name, the RAF must create an Air Force spirit...'[30] Trenchard and Sykes both placed great emphasis, verging on obsession, on investing in 'spirit' to prepare these new organisations for future conflict. Although they did not define the precise meaning of 'spirit', their writing and speeches closely matched our modern definition of organisational culture. Now, as then, we must examine how to adapt our military culture. Cyber, space, remotely operated technologies, AI, and quantum sensing are redefining the character of warfare.

Meanwhile, the expectations of the people joining Defence who have grown up in this revolution have changed. The Haythornthwaite Review acknowledged this and advised that we must 'be able to incentivise and deploy both a mass of generalists and targeted specialists'.[31] While cyber warriors can trade ones and zeros in cyberspace, and many other personnel will be fighting at range using remote, autonomous, and long-range systems, we must continue to prepare our people for the kind of brutality we have seen in trench warfare in Ukraine. The core of who we are, who we recruit, how we train, and the values we must inculcate across our organisations must be reimagined as we reconfigure to face the volatile and challenging world outlined in CP901 'Defence's Response to a more contested and volatile world' colloquially referred to as the 'Defence Command Paper Refresh'.[32] Getting the balance right between new and old will be as difficult as it was for Sykes as he wrestled with how to teach a new spirit in the Royal Flying Corps in 1912.

Training and professional military education

We must research how best to teach the fighting spirit that is now required across the spectrum of modern conflict that mixes specialist and generalist and provides digital skills while ensuring our people are ready to fight visceral combat. But our training must also equip our people to behave according to our society's written and unwritten values, norms, and laws. We must ensure that all proud members of our fighting forces who have submitted themselves to a life of service and sacrifice are treated with the equality and respect they deserve and that younger generations joining the armed forces expect. This is not just a legal requirement; treating our people accordingly is vital to establishing the cohesion we need to fight; there is no room for internal division when fighting an enemy in mortal combat. Getting this balance right is challenging and needs to be researched.

Traditionally, we have predominantly focussed on developing the warfighting ethos of the tactical warrior; it is now time to examine how to broaden the warfighting mindset across the whole of the Defence enterprise. To do that effectively, the entire organisation must be clear-eyed about the purpose of UK Defence. Every rank and grade and all the contractors across the organisation must be focussed on their role in preparing UK Defence to fight the next war whilst addressing the threats that face us below the threshold of armed conflict, such as daily cyber-attacks, terrorism, organised crime, climate change, and other transnational threats. UK Defence has articulated the need for this in the 'One Defence Mindset', but we must go beyond the strapline and consider how we actively inculcate this across the whole of the UK Defence enterprise. What should future military and Defence Civil Service training look like, and how do we build the consensus required of the 'new partnership with industry' that is outlined in CP901? These are systemic cultural issues that we should be considering in our conceptual and professional military education research questions.

Change management

'Military culture may be the most important factor not only in military effectiveness but also in the processes involved in military innovation, which is essential to preparing military organisations for the next war'.[33]

CP901 underlined that 'we must transform now to counter today's threats, but this ambitious trajectory also enables our modernisation for the challenges of the future'.[34] This has energy and urgency to conceptual work and transformation programmes heralding significant change across the UK Defence enterprise. However, decision-makers must consider the power of culture as they lead these changes. If culture is disregarded when delivering change, we risk inadvertently losing those aspects of our culture from which we derive our strength. Conversely, those who jealously safeguard parts of traditional military culture against modernisation risk preserving UK Defence in aspic and hindering innovation and agility. We must also work harder to understand how to take those resistant to change on a journey towards a different future. However, while leadership is deeply considered in military professional training, military organisational culture receives less attention in academia and professional military education. We must invest in research into military organisational culture, incorporate military culture to a greater degree in our professional military education and develop analytical tools to assess and help influence positive changes to our military culture. UK Strategic Command has initiated a major transformation programme called Solarium, the MoD Chief Operating Officer is leading a Defence Design operating model change and DCDC is writing a Campaigning Concept and a War Fighting Concept. These all are looking to transform UK Defence and, pleasingly, are all considering culture and behaviours.

Bureaucracy across the Defence Enterprise

UK Defence has a notably complex bureaucracy. It is present at the tactical level and includes overly risk-averse travel and allowance rules, time-wasting car pass requirements, business cases needed for the most minor of spends, and an ever-expanding list of online mandatory training. The RAF Culture study highlights the detrimental effect of such bureaucracy on our people; it is demoralising, a cause of learned helplessness, and highly corrosive.[35] The Haythornthwaite Review stated that our people 'feel disempowered by a system that swamps them with rules and process rather than embracing their ideas and initiative'.[36] Bureaucracy extends across the entire Defence Enterprise, right up to the strategic levels of the organisation, resulting in stultifying time lags in staffing and decision-making. Most concerningly, our bureaucracy deeply affects the procurement process. This is difficult to navigate for contractors, contributes to cost inflation, and is a barrier to rapidly acquiring new technologies

and upscaling innovation. We must change in this area and become open-minded enough to embrace radically different technologies, ensuring that we do not remain wedded to current platforms just because they are the ones around which the powerbases of our existing armed forces have been built. Many of our processes and practices, established over time and within the construct of being a government organisation, have become deeply entrenched. The constraints we have built into the organisation contribute to cultural blindness, groupthink, red tape and structural inefficiencies that reduce agility, hinder conceptual thinking, and seriously undermine our ability to adapt and think expansively about how to win. Ultimately, the very processes and practices we have created and own reduce our ability to modernise, innovate and adapt; this reduces our fighting power.[37] CP901 has laid out a path for changes to our bureaucracy, including to 'immediately focus on taking forward implementation' of the Haythornthwaite recommendations 'to modernise our offer across the whole force.' We must get this change right as we enact the proposed Haythornthwaite transformation as it has the potential to change the culture of Defence profoundly.

Risk

CP 901 has identified that 'in some areas, the fear of failure, litigation or embarrassment has created a culture that ends up compounding operational risk, slowing the pace of delivery and eroding our strategic advantage'.[38] UK Defence has rightly emphasised how it addresses risk; it was previously inadequate in many areas. However, the pendulum has swung so far that we often try to eliminate risk rather than balance risk against the need to maintain a credible fighting force that is readying itself to engage in the most bitter conflicts. Risk analysis has real value; losing personnel and equipment unnecessarily undermines the physical component of fighting power. However, an overly risk-averse fighting force sets itself up for an inadequate training versus battlefield outcome balance. Analysis of our cultural approach to risk is in urgent need of attention and research to ensure that we assume an appropriate level of risk in our day-to-day training to ensure that we prevail when we fight, given the threats we face. We must retain the ability to 'train hard to fight easy'.

Conclusion

In an increasingly unstable international system accompanied by rapid technological changes, the UK must adapt and be ready to fight in high-end warfare to protect the UK and the NATO Alliance. The organisational Culture of UK Defence underpins that readiness. Organisational culture is a powerful force shown to affect efficiency and battlefield outcomes. It also plays a significant role in the outcome of change. As UK Defence adopts new technologies and conducts change programmes, organisational culture theory and practice offer an opportunity to adopt a systems approach to ensure that everything we do contributes to our fighting power. We must examine how to conduct our training and professional military education, reduce our bureaucracy, re-evaluate our approach to risk, and ensure that culture is central to our change programmes.

The brutal conflict in Ukraine shows that our adversaries are ready to fight hard, step outside international law, and are prepared to take vast losses in warfare. Our people must still be trained and ready to fight in such visceral combat, but we must also have a force mix that harnesses technologies that require new types of warriors. Meanwhile, to achieve cohesion, all our people must feel valued, and we need to be a modern organisation that is attractive to a future workforce. Getting the balance right between our traditions and modernisation will be challenging and requires deep and considered research for our armed forces. We must also ensure that the broader Defence Enterprise is honed for the future, and we need to consider how to take the 'One Defence Mindset' beyond being a strapline and energise 'the new partnership with industry'.

The threats we face indicate we must change. This has been recognised in Defence conceptual work and CP901. However, we must engage in cultural change to enact the significant change sought. Hierarchical organisations with strong traditions find this problematic. To do this effectively, we must place a much greater emphasis on understanding the requirements of our future military organisational culture in our conceptual work and in the research questions we set ourselves in our professional military education institutions.

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About the Freeman Air and Space Institute

The Freeman Air and Space Institute is an inter-disciplinary initiative of the School of Security Studies, King's College London. The Freeman Institute is dedicated to generating original knowledge and understanding of air and space issues. The Freeman Institute seeks to inform scholarly, policy and doctrinal debates in a rapidly evolving strategic environment characterised by transformative technological change which is increasing the complexity of the air and space domains.

The Freeman Institute places a priority on identifying, developing and cultivating air and space thinkers in academic and practical contexts, as well as informing, equipping and stimulating relevant air and space education provision at King's and beyond.

The Institute is named after Air Chief Marshal Sir Wilfrid Freeman (1888–1953), who was crucially influential in British air capability development in the late 1930s and during the Second World War, making an important contribution to the Allied victory. He played a central role in the development of successful aircraft including the Spitfire, Lancaster and Mosquito, and in planning the wartime aircraft economy – the largest state-sponsored industrial venture in British history.

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