Learning about Counter-Insurgency

John Kiszely

Lieutenant General Sir John Kiszely is Director of the Defence Academy of the United Kingdom. The views expressed in this article are personal and do not necessarily reflect Government policy.

Insurgency, it seems, is with us to stay – for a while, anyway. There are a number of reasons why insurgency – the use of subversion and armed conflict by an organized movement to overthrow a constitutional government[1] – has become a form of conflict much in evidence at the start of the twenty-first century, and why it is unlikely to become less so in the years immediately ahead. Among the most obvious reasons are the erosion of the sovereignty of nation-states, the increase in the number of failed or failing states, the rise in intra-state conflict, the advent of transnational insurgency[2] and the perceived ability of terrorists to achieve their aims – 'to coerce or intimidate governments or societies to achieve political, religious or ideological objectives'.[3] Equally obvious – to insurgents, at least – is the technological battlefield superiority of the world's most powerful armed forces, and the resultant folly of taking on such armed forces on the conventional battlefield. Even if General Sir Rupert Smith may be over-stating the case by declaring that 'war no longer exists',[4] he is surely right that war off the conventional battlefield, or 'war amongst the people' is by far the more likely activity. There is, of course, nothing new about insurgency – the nineteenth and twentieth centuries provide plenty of examples of this type of warfare – and, therefore, no shortage of opportunities to learn lessons. But how well do militaries, in general, learn the lessons of counter-insurgency? What factors affect this learning process? And what might the answer to these questions tell us about how armed forces should approach the subject of learning about counter-insurgency in future? This article sets out to answer these questions.

Learning the Lessons?

It does not require a comprehensive survey to find evidence to suggest that not all militaries learn the lessons of counter-insurgency as well as they might. The British armed forces have tended to be quicker to cite such evidence in the performance of others rather than in their own, but some introspection is valuable. The Malaya Emergency 1948-1960, for example, is a much lauded counter-insurgency campaign, but often over-looked is the fact that in the early years, before the arrival of General Sir Gerald Templer in 1952, the British Army achieved very limited success.[5] One reason for this was its initial tendency to view the

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Emergency essentially as a security problem with a security solution; on arrival, Templer found it necessary to remind his force that 'the shooting side of this business is only 25 per cent of the trouble'.[6] Moreover, the British military's early approach in Malaya was essentially a warfighting one –

manoeuvring to bring firepower to bear on the enemy – not least on the grounds that that was the approach for which it was trained, and which had, after all, proved successful all over the globe in a World War only a few years previously. Typical of this approach was its favoured tactic of large (up to brigade-size) 'sweeps', described by one commentator as 'pursuing insurgents as if it was engaged on a large scale partridge drive',[7] and its use of warfighting measurements of success: for example, the numbers of enemy killed, wounded and captured. In noting this approach, John Nagl quotes the General Officer Commanding Malaya in 1948, Major General Charles Boucher, who described his programme to the Malayan Legislative Council as follows:

My object is to break the insurgents concentrations, to bring them to battle before they are ready, and drive them underground or into the jungle, and then to follow them there, by troops in the jungles, and by police backed by troops and by the RAF outside of them. I intend to keep them constantly moving and depriving them of food and recruits, because if they are constantly moving they cannot terrorize an area properly so that they can get their commodities from it; and then ferret them out of their holes, wherever these holes may be.[8]

General Boucher had some experience of counter-insurgency, but rather less understanding of it.[9] In the absence of any contemporary counter-insurgency doctrine, he might have benefited from a closer historical study of, for example, T. E. Lawrence, Orde Wingate or Mao Zedong. There was an earlier text that could also have proved useful: Charles Callwell's book, 'Small Wars',[10] published in 1906, about Britain's imperial counter-insurgency campaigns. As Callwell makes clear, what defines 'small wars' is not their size, but their characteristic. Those tempted to fight small wars as if they were big wars might have noted Callwell's warning that, 'The conduct of small wars is in certain respects an art by itself,

diverging widely from what is adapted to the conditions of regular warfare.'[11] Nagl cites the British Army in the Malayan Emergency as an example of an army as a 'learning institution', but concludes that in the first four years, 'Whereas there were encouraging signs of learning from below...the middle and high levels of command demonstrated marked resistance to change, remaining entrenched in their desire to fight in Malaya as they had in Europe.'[12]

Air Despatcher of 55 coy AD, RASC, throws out propaganda leaflets from a RAF Valetta aircraft over the Malayan jungle in 1958.

It is perhaps surprising that the lessons of the Malayan Emergency were not more obviously learnt in Britain's subsequent counter-insurgency campaign in Cyprus. For example, one of the clearest early lessons from Malaya, stated in the 'Report of the Police Commission of Malaya 1950', had been the importance of an impartial, disciplined police force. But only five years later, the British commander in Cyprus, Field Marshal Harding, was basing his campaign on a police force renowned not only for its partiality and ill-discipline, but also for its corruption and brutality, thus playing into the hands of the EOKA insurgents and their leader, Colonel Grivas. As James Corum has pointed out,

If Harding carefully had planned to alienate the entire Greek population of the island and push the moderate Greeks into full support of EOKA, he could not have done better than by his policy of unleashing a horde of untrained, poorly-led Turkish police on the population...The abusive behaviour of the Cyprus Police was a godsend to the insurgents... Colonel Grivas declared that the first act of the new government after Cypriot independence should be to raise a statue to Field Marshal Harding "since he has done more than anyone else to keep alive the spirit of Hellenistic resistance in Cyprus".[13]

Moreover, despite the evidence in Malaya, Harding appeared to forego a hearts-and-minds approach in favour of one that would 'bludgeon the population into compliance with British rule',[14] viewed the campaign as essentially military, favoured large-scale traditional operations such as formation sweeps on very limited intelligence, and failed to see the need to sustain the campaign in the long term. In the latter case, he was well aware of the strength of Templer's views on the subject. In 1953, Harding, then Chief of the General Staff, had publicly announced that the Malayan Emergency 'was nearly won'. Questioned about this at a press conference, Templer had declared, 'I'll shoot the bastard who says this emergency is over.'[15]

Similarly, in Vietnam both the French and the United States militaries favoured what Max Boot has called 'big war' methods,[16] epitomized by General William Westmoreland, '...sent to fight a war for which nothing in his training had prepared him. His way was the army way, the American way, the World War Two way. Find the enemy, fix him in place and annihilate him with withering fire power'.[17] Like Boucher in Malaya and Harding in Cyprus, Westmoreland drew too heavily on his own experience and too little on a study of history or theory, contributing to his difficulty in comprehending the operational environment in which he found himself. Such historical and theoretical texts were certainly available; indeed, the

early 1960s was a period rich in the publication of some highly notable ones,[18] although perhaps not exactly of the type that Westmoreland was looking for. In his words, 'There was no book to tell us how to do the job.'[19] There was, however, one that could have been particularly useful: the excellent doctrinal text produced by the US Marine Corps in the 1930s entitled, 'The Small Wars Manual'. In referring to it, Max Boot points out that:

> The manual is keenly aware of the limits of military power in general, "Peace and industry cannot be restored permanently without appropriate provisions for the economic welfare of the people," the manual says. In keeping with this attitude, the manual suggests that "hatred of the enemy", usually inculcated amongst troops in major wars is entirely inappropriate in these circumstances. "In small wars, tolerance, sympathy and kindness should be the keynote to our relationship with the mass of the population".[20]

As Boot concludes, 'Small wars cannot be fought by big war methods.'

This statement has echoes in the early years of the British Army's campaign in Northern Ireland, which started in 1969. It is easy in the light of the later success of this campaign to forget the early mistakes that were made, and the time it took to rectify them. Among such mistakes were the seemingly unqualified initial support for a highly partisan police force, internment without trial, and large (up to brigade-size) cordon-and-search operations on very limited intelligence, often at the expense of the hearts-and-minds campaign. Without mistakes such as these, the situation might not have escalated. In Rod Thornton's words, 'The British Army was committed to a peace support task in Northern Ireland in 1969 but the errors made by those within its ranks went a long way in moving that task from one of peace support to one of countering a fully-fledged insurgency'.[21] Although this transition may have been due in greater degree to

errors made by those outside the ranks of the military, it nevertheless appears surprising in retrospect that the British Army's wide experience in counter-insurgency campaigns in the 1950s and 60s in such places as Malaya, Cyprus, Kenya, Borneo and Aden, did not prepare it better for the challenges it faced in Northern Ireland at this time. This is all the more surprising since these campaigns had been well documented, and a process existed for feeding 'lessons learned' into British military doctrine, with such publications as 'Keeping the Peace' (1963) and 'Counter-Revolutionary Warfare'(1969).[22]

Learning in the Military

Whilst it would be entirely wrong from such a brief and narrow survey to conclude that militaries never learn the lessons of counter-insurgency, there is enough evidence to suggest that they do not always learn those lessons as often or as quickly or as well as they might. Therefore a question is to be raised about why this might be so.

At the outset of answering this question, it should be noted that imperfection in learning in the military is not confined to learning about counter-insurgency. There are a number of factors which can combine to retard the speed of learning in armed forces. First is a tendency towards anti-intellectualism. Although there is far less evidence to substantiate such a charge in many armed forces today, including the British, it was as late as 1984 that Sir Michael Howard was writing of 'the complacent anti-intellectualism which has long been a predominant tendency of a British army which takes a perverse delight in learning its lessons the hard way.'[23] Secondly, since acceptance of criticism is often the first step to learning, a characteristic of a learning organization is its ability to accommodate criticism, both internal and external. Many militaries face a difficulty here; not only are armed forces rigid hierarchies — hierarchies being notoriously susceptible to feeling threatened by internal criticism — but they are also inherently proud

organizations, and thus potentially resistant to external criticism. The more rigid the hierarchy and the prouder the organization, the less able it is to accommodate criticism. The third factor has been the absence in many militaries of a seat of learning. For example, the most significant contributions in the British military to the advancement of military science, in the widest sense of that term, have more often resulted spasmodically from the ideas of individuals, such as Basil Liddell Hart, JFC Fuller and Richard Simpkin, than from sustained development from within a military seat of learning, since no such thing existed.[24] Now, with the establishment of the Defence Academy, there is no such excuse. Fourthly, the key final part of the learning process is making the necessary change, but militaries are inherently conservative organizations, cautious about change, particularly change that affects structure or culture. Finally, militaries the world over are prone to confusing progress with activity, training hard but for the wrong thing. For example, writing of the Second World War British senior commanders in North Africa during 1941-42, Field Marshal Lord Carver observed,

> The British commanders were not supermen. They were neither better nor worse than those who succeeded them. They were faced with a form of warfare completely novel to all, for which their experience and training was of little value.[25]

JFC Fuller's observations of earlier commanders indicates where the responsibility for such a state of affairs might lie:

> Because they had learnt nothing from the wars of Alexander and his successors, the Romans invariably were surprised, as much by their ignorance and tactical blunders as by Hannibal`s insight, foresight and imagination. Nor was it the fault of the generals themselves, who seldom lacked courage, but of the Roman military system.[26]

Learning about Counter-Insurgency

There are, therefore, a number of factors – all essentially cultural challenges – which, if allowed to, can adversely affect the military's ability to learn appropriately. But there are a number of further factors – again, essentially cultural challenges – which can adversely affect the military's ability to learn appropriately about counter-insurgency in particular. Foremost amongst these is the perception that a military has of counter-insurgency. If it views it as a type of warfighting – easy to do, because counter-insurgency often looks, smells and feels like warfighting; indeed, some participants at some moments may be fighting for their lives – it is liable to make fundamental errors in application, not least in breaching one of Clausewitz's most important dicta: 'The first, the supreme, the most far-reaching act of judgement that the statesman and commander have to make is to establish...the kind of war on which they are embarking; neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into, something that is alien to its nature.'[27]

This is exacerbated by the military's tendency, unless checked, either to ignore doctrine completely, or to treat it as Holy Writ, applying it unquestioningly, as a template, regardless of the circumstances. Of the two, the latter is probably the more dangerous. Doctrine tends to be labelled and pigeon-holed by type of operation – for example, Warfighting, Peacekeeping, Peace Enforcement, Counter-Insurgency – and can too often be seen by the unthinking, despite the health-warning on the packet, as prescriptive. Moreover, these reassuringly neat delineations sit uneasily with the reality that campaigns involving counter-insurgency are inherently messy – a kaleidoscope of different types of operation – and, therefore, remarkably resistant to neatness in delineation. Indeed, all counter-insurgencies are *sui generis* – of their own kind – making problematic the transfer of lessons from one to another.[28] Thus, unless they are careful,

those embarking on an operation can tend to identify the anticipated circumstances in terms of the doctrine perceived to be closest to it, reach for the doctrinal publication concerned, and end up trying to fit the circumstances to the doctrine, rather than the other way round – thereby 'trying to turn it into something that is alien to its nature'.

A related factor which detracts from the ability of many militaries to learn

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about counter-insurgency has been their tendency to forego serious study of history and theory beyond trying to find a 'book to tell us how to do the job'. The reasons for this are related to the anti-intellectualism noted earlier, and also to a certain amount of intellectual laziness and lack of imagination; but the complex and *sui generis* nature of counter-insurgency makes a learning approach restricted to personal experience singularly fallible. This is not to decry personal experience as an important element in the learning process, but to emphasize a need to balance it with the study of both history and theory, the relationship between the two being well illuminated by Clausewitz:

> *Theory becomes a guide to anyone who wants to learn about war from books. It will light his way, ease his progress, train his judgement, and help him to avoid pitfalls.*[29]

Learning about counter-insurgency is also constrained by a reluctance of state authorities to acknowledge insurgencies as insurgencies, since, in

doing so, they acknowledge the existence of an organized popular movement. There is, therefore, often a preference to portray the problem as being only a terrorist one; this can lead to conclusions that the antidote is, by definition, counter-terrorism – a matter of security. This invariably results in counter-productive action when applied to insurgency, which requires an antidote of which security is but one ingredient. Applying only the security line of operation to an insurgency is a sure way of intensifying it.

But perhaps the single most significant cultural factor affecting a military's ability to learn about counter-insurgency is the strength of its warrior ethos. To be capable of warfighting, an army needs to have as its characteristic cultural spirit, or ethos, one which is warfighting-oriented, and its soldiers need to have a self-perception as warriors. These are the essentials of the warrior ethos. Lose the warrior ethos and you lose the fighting power.[30] But to be capable of operations other than war – operations such as peacekeeping and counter-insurgency – an army needs its soldiers to have a perception of themselves as something other than warriors. Without such a perception, they are liable to apply a warrior approach, for example exercising hard power when they should be exercising soft power, 'fighting small wars with big war methods'. Combining these two cultures is remarkably difficult; it is thus remarkably difficult for an army to be really good at both warfighting and counter-insurgency. Notable examples of this dichotomy are the Russian and Israeli armies, highly adept warfighting machines with a warrior ethos so strong that they have found it almost impossible to adapt to the requirements of counter-insurgency. On the other side of this coin are those armed forces which have largely foregone warfighting as their core activity, instead choosing to become specialist peacekeeping forces, and which have found it less easy than they might have wished to regain the warrior ethos needed to meet the challenges of combat operations. Those armies with a very strong warrior

ethos, whose soldiers see themselves purely as warriors, tend to view counter-insurgency as a fringe activity, rejecting the notion of expertise in counter-insurgency as a meaningful yardstick of military prowess or professionalism.

This is exacerbated by the nature of counter-insurgency itself, comprising, as it does, features with which the pure warrior ethos is highly uneasy: complexity, ambiguity, and uncertainty; politics; an inherent resistance to short-term solutions; problems that the military alone cannot solve, requiring co-operation with other highly diverse agencies and individuals to achieve a comprehensive approach; the need for interaction with indigenous people whose culture it does not understand; and a requirement to talk to at least some of its opponents, which it can view as treating with the enemy. Such a military sees its task hedged about with unfair constraints: over-tight rules of engagement, negating the use of its trump card – firepower; perceived over-emphasis on force protection and its disciplinary consequences; the need to accommodate the media. Moreover, in the eyes of the warrior, counter-insurgency calls for some decidedly un-warrior-like qualities, such as emotional intelligence, empathy, subtlety, sophistication, nuance and political adroitness. Armies that find difficulty with these unwelcome features tend to view counter-insurgency as an aberration, look forward to the opportunity of returning to 'proper soldiering', and see subsequent training as an opportunity to regain their warfighting skills rather than to learn the lessons of counter-insurgency.

Conclusions

From this brief analysis of some of the problems militaries face in learning about counter-insurgency, a number of conclusions offer themselves about how armed forces should approach the subject of such learning in future. First is a need to recognize that adapting to counter-insurgency presents particular challenges to militaries, and that many

of these challenges have at their root issues of organizational culture. The implications of this are outside the scope of this study. Secondly, there is a need to acknowledge that while counter-insurgency is war in the Clausewitzian sense of being 'the continuation of policy by other means'[31] not all types of war are won by warfighting; indeed, some are lost

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that way. And those who practise counter-insurgency need to be much more than warriors within the narrow definition of that term as it relates to warfighting. The role of militaries is likely to remain as one of fighting and winning their nation's wars, but armed forces do not have the luxury of choosing the type of war they will be required to fight. That luxury largely belongs to their adversaries, and the likelihood is that for militaries in the top warfighting league, for the very reason that they are in the top warfighting league, most wars in the years immediately ahead will be asymmetric, and will be wars of, or involving, counter-insurgency. The definitions of military professionalism and military excellence will need to accommodate this fact. The difficulty for militaries is that there is no guarantee that some of the wars ahead of them will not be warfighting affairs, or that some of the counter-insurgencies will not include significant elements of warfighting.

Many of the other conclusions of this study fall into the categories of

improved 'lessons learned' processes, updated doctrine and better training, and in many armed forces these subjects have received a great deal of attention in recent years, with significant progress being made. In addition, there has been increasing recognition from participants, military and civilian, in counter-insurgency campaigns that since success relies on all lines of operation working together in a joined-up way – the 'comprehensive approach' – those organizations, governmental and non-governmental, national and international, that will find themselves working together need to train together.

But while this progress is wholly welcome, it goes only some of the way to address many of the issues identified, in particular the intellectual demands that the nature of counter-insurgency makes on military leaders at all levels. It is too easy to see meeting these demands as a question of better training and doctrine, overlooking the extent to which it is, instead, a question of education. It is necessary here to differentiate between training – preparing people, individually or collectively, to carry out specific tasks – and education – the development of mental powers. Training is appropriate preparation for the predictable; but for the unpredictable, education is required. As has been pointed out, operations involving counter-insurgency are characterized by unpredictability, and also by uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity; this calls for minds that can not only cope with, but excel in, such an environment, thus minds that are agile, flexible, enquiring, imaginative, capable of rigorous analysis and objective thinking, that can conceptualize and innovate. Developing minds in this way is most decidedly not something that can be achieved as part of pre-deployment training.

In addition to developing minds is a requirement, where necessary, to broaden them – to make them more open and sensitive to the views of others, and less certain of their own

omniscience and rectitude. Part of this is the ability and willingness of the military to comprehend the importance of what some might term the 'non-military' factors inherent in counter-insurgency. This applies not just to counter-insurgency in particular – that is to say, to a specific campaign – but to counter-insurgency in general; only then can valid comparisons and sound generalizations be made. Thus, military leaders, and not just senior ones, need a high level of understanding of factors such as the political dimension of counter-insurgency, the constituent elements of good governance and prosperity, the role of ideology and religion, the nature of societies and culture, and of minds and people. These leaders' studies, therefore, need to include politics, economics, anthropology, sociology and psychology. And underpinning all of these is the study of history, with the need to undertake it, as Sir Michael Howard has warned us, 'in width, in depth and in context'.[32] Moreover, the multi-disciplinary nature of counter-insurgency indicates that the history to be studied should not be confined to military history. But meaningful study in all these subjects is time-consuming, and time is a commodity in short supply for the military; in fact, the rate of current operational commitments means that for many militaries the time available for learning has never been less. The potential pitfall is, thus, that while acknowledging that learning about counter-insurgency is largely about developing understanding, armed forces will devote less time than is necessary to achieve it. One way of helping to square this circle is certainly to encourage continuous self-education as part of this process, although the degree to which very busy officers have the time available for this should not be over-estimated. But there are no short cuts. Westmoreland was right: 'There was no book to tell us how to do the job.' Nor is there one.

In summary, therefore, while it is easy to see the solution to improved learning about counter-insurgency

purely in terms of improved training, this study concludes that this would be fallacious, and that at the root of the challenge lie questions of culture and education. ■

NOTES

1. British military doctrine defines insurgency as a movement rather than an activity: 'An organized movement aimed at the overthrow of a constitutional government through the use of subversion and armed conflict'. Joint Doctrine Publication ADP 0-01.

2. See John Mackinlay, Defeating Complex Insurgencies (RUSI Whitehall Paper No 64, 2005) and Rick Brennan et al, Future Insurgency Threats, (Rand, DRR-3443-OSD SOLIC, 2005)

3. ADP 0-01, Op cit.

4. Rupert Smith, The Utility of Force, (London: Allen Lane, 2005), p.1. Subsequently qualified as '…war as cognitively known to most non-combatants, war as a battle in a field between men and machinery, war as a massive deciding event: such war no longer exists.'

5. One notable success was the 'Briggs Plan' of Lieutenant General Sir Harold Briggs, Director of Operations from April 1950 to November 1951, but Briggs lacked the authority to overcome those who opposed change. According to one author, 'Briggs battled on, keeping his frustrations to himself, until at the end of his tour in November 1951, when he went back to Cyprus a sick and disillusioned man, to die there within a year'. John Cloake, Templer. Tiger of Malaya, (London: Harrap, 1985), p.198.

6. Cloake, Op cit., p.262.

7. John Coates, Suppressing Insurgency: An Analysis of the Malayan Emergency 1948-54 (London: Westview Press, 1992)

8. John Nagl, Learning to Eat Soup With a Knife. Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam (Chicago, 2002) p.67.

9. In July 1948, he announced that, 'I have had experience in fighting red terrorists in Greece and India, and I can tell you this is by far the easiest problem I have ever tackled'. Coates, Op cit., pp 31-32.

10. Charles Callwell, Small Wars. Their Principle and Practice (Omaha: University of Nebraska Press, 1996).

11. Callwell, Op cit., p. 23.

12. Nagl, Op cit., pp. 79-81.

13. James Corum, Training Indigenous Forces in Counter-Insurgency, (SSS, Carlisle, 2006), p.14

14. Corum, Op cit., p.31.

15. Ibid, p. 35.

16. Max Boot, The Savage Wars of Peace (London: Basic Books, 2002), p.283.

17. Ibid.

18. For example, Robert Thompson, Defeating Communist Insurgency (New York: Praeger, 1960); Bernard Fall, Street Without Joy (New York: Schocken Books, 1961); Robert Trinquier, Modern Warfare. A French View of Counterinsurgency (New York: Praeger, 1964); and David Galula, Counterinsurgency Warfare. Theory and Practice (New York: Praeger, 1964); Robert Taber, The War of the Flea, A Study of Guerrilla Warfare Theory and Practice (New York: Citadel, 1965).

19. William Westmoreland, A Soldier Reports (New York: Da Capo, 1976), p. 240.

20. Boot, Op cit., p. 285.

21. Rod Thornton, 'Getting It Wrong. The Crucial Mistakes Made in the Early Stages of the British Army`s Deployment in Northern Ireland (August 1969 to March 1972)' in Journal of Strategic Studies (Vol 30, Number 1, Feb 2007).

22. MOD WO Code 9800 and MOD Land Operations AC 70516, respectively.

23. Michael Howard, in Carl von Clausewitz, On War, translated and edited by Peter Paret and Michael Howard, (Princeton UP, 1984), p.38.

24. For brief periods, such as when Fuller was chief instructor at the Staff College, Camberley, the Service staff colleges could have advanced a claim to this, but not with much justification over a sustained period of time.

25. Michael Carver, Britain's Army in the Twentieth Century (London: MacMillan, 1998), p. 223.

26. JFC Fuller, Decisive Battles of the Western World (Eyre and Spottiswood, 1954), p. 127.

27. Clausewitz, Op cit., p.88.

28. For example, much of Callwell's Small Wars now appears highly dated and overly-prescriptive, requiring critical analysis in gaining a better understanding of the subject.

29. Clausewitz, Op cit., p. 141.

30. 'The ability to fight, consisting of a conceptual component (encompassing the thought process involved in producing military effectiveness); a moral component (the ability to get people to fight) and a physical component (the means to fight), measured by assessment of operational capability'. MOD AAP-1.

31. Clausewitz, Op cit., p.87.

32. Michael Howard, 'The Use and Abuse of Military History', in RUSI Journal (Number 625, 1962), p. 8