

## What being in the SAS taught me about leadership and teamwork in business



On November 15th David Stirling, creator of the Special Air Service, would have been 100 years old and next year is the 75th anniversary of the SAS.

The 'Regiment' as it is known colloquially by its members, was created to counter the threat of Hitler's aggression in Africa. It was made up of small, highly trained and motivated teams whose strategy was to operate behind enemy lines with the aim of creating havoc, fear and destruction, then

slipping away undetected.

I took some time reflecting on what lessons I had learnt, applied and transferred into my life and work as a result of my time being a member of this illustrious '*Regiment*'.

**Create the culture and they will follow:** The SAS selection process is a highly demanding affair which challenges candidates physically, mentally and emotionally. During part of my selection I was picked to swim across a river first. It was 5 am in the morning in mid-winter. The water was frozen at the edges and we were to swim across with just shorts on. Nobody was sure whether it was even possible to navigate across the frozen, murky looking river. The Directing Staff (DS) thought it better to send one man and if he made it across alive – they're allowed to lose a few people occasionally - then they would send the rest of the candidates.

Not wanting to appear timid, I ran toward the ice, eventually collapsing into the blackness below. The coldness stunned my body into a state of shock. I had to fight my way across the ice and sucking mud below, eventually reaching mid-stream where the water flowed more freely. One of the DS asked me how the water was. Trying to look casual I went into a back stroke and attempted to say; "the water's fine". I then realised that I hadn't managed to take a breath yet so all that escaped from my lips was a hoarse whisper. The DS team laughed and sent the rest in.

What makes people volunteer for something like this after all, the SAS don't need to hire recruitment consultants?

Answer: The culture.

Every organisation has its own unique culture; defined as the set of deeply embedded, self-reinforcing behaviours, beliefs, and mind-set that determine 'the way we do things around here.' Talented people like to challenge themselves and are drawn by the 'Elite Magnetism'. They want to be part of a team engaged in meaningful work. Even to the point of endangering their lives - one guy did actually die on the river crossing.

Culture is often seen as a fluffy, soft component in business. Its powerful benefits are sometimes lost on ineffective leaders. It is however; one of the most important drivers of long term, sustainable success. As Tom Peters famously said:

"Culture eats strategy for breakfast"

It's not that strategy isn't important, it is. But a strategy will only succeed if the organisation's culture can support it.

By the way, we brought the dead guy back to life again. You never leave one of your own behind.

**A leader needs courage when leading ACE teams & individuals:** A leader might believe that with an elite squad of ACE members he can achieve a lot. But it takes a lot of courage to lead a team like this.

**Firstly: ACE means:**

**Autonomous:** the team and its members can act independently which gives it the ability to handle VUCA (Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity and Ambiguity) more effectively. An agile business team can react with more clarity and deal with clients more effectively in the moment as they are the eyes and ears on the ground.

**Creative:** ACE team members are experienced and confident about solving their own problems so they're creative by nature. Nothing drives creativity and flow states than the act of being creative.

**Empowered:** Having all this agility and creativity is only an advantage if the individuals can act on their own volition. They are empowered to make decisions which will influence future strategy and results.

A team of us were on an escape and evasion phase of a large multi-national exercise for 'prone to capture', Long Range Patrol troops. We were dropped off on a peninsula of land

somewhere in the Far East. We were supposedly to move toward a line of hunter forces who were using dogs, infra-red cameras and all manner of trips and trap hazards. The idea was that we would not actually be able to make it past the line of hunter forces and would spend 24 hours being interrogated. It was around midnight. We were hunkered down in a little hollow and could hear screams and shouts emanating from the hunter forces and captured soldiers. Trip flares interspersed the blackness. I was in charge of the patrol at this point. I was thinking about zigging whilst the rest zagged, in other words do the exact opposite of what the other teams were doing and what the hunter force were hoping for. Our plan; go to sleep.

We slept in the little hollow for a couple of hours and let the hunter force get tired of looking for us. As dawn approached, we made our move. We were so close we could hear the hunter force shouting and soldiers groaning from being in stress positions for hours. We moved off tactically... in the opposite direction.

After a couple of hours we came across a small boat in a cove. We commandeered the boat and keeping low, paddled out to sea and around the line of hunter forces. We made it past, rowed back into land, and hitched a ride with some locals into town. We always carried civilian clothes for such situations, so got changed and went for a few hours R&R. At one minute before the end of the exercise we rocked up in taxis with shopping bags and souvenirs. Around us were lines of dishevelled and thoroughly miserable looking soldiers from several nations. All were sat with hands on heads staring, open-mouthed, at us.

Our 'boss' waved us over and the officer in charge of the exercise asked him who we were. He explained. The officer went purple and stifled an explosion of rage. In the heated discussion that followed, we overheard him accuse us of cheating, disobeying orders, missing the point of the exercise, practically everything under the Sun. Our 'boss' didn't raise his voice once or miss a beat, just explained that what we had done was exactly what we were trained to do and what was expected of us. It took courage to defend us as he did.

It takes a courageous leader to let go of control, to actually allow the team to make their own decisions and furthermore, defend the attacks that come from the status-quo. High performing individuals and teams, the mavericks of this world, are often attacked when they're busy disrupting the world of comfort zones. But they're the ones who make a difference.

**Who dares wins... But not always!:** The founder of the SAS, David Stirling, was convinced that small groups of soldiers involved in covert operations were more effective than whole platoons. He also realised he had a job to reach, let alone convince, the higher echelons of

power of his ideas. Sporting crutches for a broken leg caused by an earlier parachuting accident, Stirling climbed a fence into the Middle East HQ compound. Being chased by guards, he eventually managed to come face-to-face with the Deputy Commander Middle East General Ritchie. Stirling did manage to convince Ritchie and after 'relieving' equipment from other units the SAS was formed.

Stirling's entrepreneurial spirit worked for him in this situation but there are plenty of times when daring exploits have come to a sticky end. Timing and luck are as big a component of success as ideas and motivation. There were plenty of great soldiers on my selection who failed the course due to injury. There was nothing '*wrong*' with them, they were just unlucky or they got caught in terrible weather conditions.

Every entrepreneurial adventure needs ample dollops of both courage and serendipity. By all means have a go but get to reality as quickly as possible. As TED speaker and founder of Idealab, a start-up incubator, points out, timing is the biggest predictor of business success.

Don't take failure personally, just do it cheaply. You're only a failure when the times you get knocked down overtakes the amount of times you get back up. The SAS motto: 'Who dares Wins' is true, but only if you dare to adapt and keep going in the face of defeat.

**Chaos Theory Rules OK?:** On the universal life cycle, shifts happen. One day everything seems to be going in your favour, the next minute the bottom drops out your business or the market. Actually, it doesn't just happen it's been building up, but not many people bother to take note when the signs appear or even look.

With success comes certain fears and delusions arise to support those fears. So for instance, when the banking crisis appeared on the horizon, people shifted into denial, in fact we're still there now. But just saying that can make you really unpopular as the whistle-blowers found out as they were being sacked and smeared even though they were right.

The universe is run by chaos theory which is when the present determines the future, but the approximate present does not approximately determine the future. There are just too many influences to control and be able to predict precisely what's going to happen. An approximate summation of the present can be wildly wrong down the line. The SAS can have a well thought out plan which turned to chaos practically as soon as they've landed on the ground.

That's why you need to be able to handle VUCA – Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity and Ambiguity. Volatility, according to McKinsey's Economic Snapshot for September 2015, is on

the rise across the world and is cited more often than anything else as being a threat to businesses. Actually, when execs don't think volatility is a threat, that's when they're buying into the delusion of certainty.

A patrol would always consider the variables that might introduce themselves, when planning missions. They always have an '*Actions-On*' plan. They try to consider every eventuality and think what could go wrong. They then formulate a set of plans e.g. *actions on* being ambushed at X, '*Shoot 'n' Scoot*' to RV Y.

Mostly not enough time is spent on the preparation phase in planning of what could go wrong so when it does happen, its hailed as a big shock, which wasn't really a shock at all; it's just *Chaos* doing its thing.

**The SEAL of effective leadership:** Leadership should be considered a verb not an entitlement. Leadership is vital in firefight, you want one person leading the way so that there is no confusion. But these are the signs of great leadership.

**Shared:** Anybody in a patrol could lead a mission dependent on experience and skills or it's 'just their turn'. When you've high performing team, everyone is treated as an adult. Rank or position was not that important, skills and experience counted for more. Many an officer had his ear chewed off for presenting a rubbish plan by somebody of lower rank. By sharing leadership duties, it also makes everybody more empathic. You've been on both sides of the coin so you tend to be more respectful which boosts overall morale and performance.

**Engaging:** A team would always be involved at the earliest opportunity as it gave them more time to come up with suggestions later when orders were being formulated. Any errors in communication were spotted because everybody's involved from the start-up.

**Advocacy:** Everybody gets a say in what's happening because collective intelligence is more effective than an individual. Once the orders are being given by the patrol leader, most people already know what's coming and so it makes the orders easier to remember too.

**Legitimate:** A lot of wars shouldn't have happened and a lot of needless suffering could have been eliminated if '*so-called*' leaders stuck to being morally legitimate. There have been times when a patrol has been compromised by innocents and even though it's put the patrol in danger, they've stuck to their own moral code. You know the risks involved with the work, but you also know how you will act because you've got to live with yourself afterwards. A

companies values should be meaningful, not just a nice thing to stick on the walls. It's what you stand for and gives everybody a code of conduct should the poo-poo hit the fan.

Values are important, Enron and now Volkswagen are learning about karma the hard way.

**Hearts & minds lead the way:** A really effective anti-terrorist operation occurred in the 1950's. General Calvert of the SAS was asked to intervene in the Malayan Conflict. Normal military tactics hadn't worked in the Jungle, so Calvert went out to win the *hearts and minds* of the local aboriginals. Calvert's men helped the locals with medical supplies and security. This meant the '*enemy*' were left isolated and without assistance.

Of course warfare today is primarily dropping bombs on people and hope you get the odd target. Then we wonder why the locals don't cooperate.

No matter what you're doing, whatever business you think you're in, you're in the people business first. If you contribute to stakeholder's happiness, well-being and personal development, then you'll win their *hearts and minds*.

Win the hearts and minds of your potential clients and they'll *buy into* you as opposed to just *buying off* you.

**Communication is Key:** Two SAS soldiers came across a village in the jungle that had been decimated during a typhoon. All communications were down and there was no way for the villagers to contact the outside world for help. The soldiers got out their radio and slung an antennae high into the trees. Using Morse code they sent a message back to their base in the UK who promptly sent word back to the relevant people in the disaster zone.

The SAS consider communication one of, if not the most important skill. It's the same in business. Communication is essential and as the NLP presupposition goes,

*'The value of your communication is the response you get back'.*

**Clarity of Mission:** When working with clients we'll often go into their offices and interview team members. We'll ask several questions around the subjects of purpose, mission and strategy. We've generally found, as Harvard Business Review did recently, that around 70% of employees are not aware of the strategy. We call it the mushroom mentality in the military.

"Kept in the dark and fed on '*manure*'"

In order for a team to reach its potential, they must have clarity on shared goals and purpose. With clarity comes a back-stop as a place of reference. Where individual members within a group can ask themselves “Is this action going to move the organisation closer to the target or further away?”

**All systems have an optimum state:** With Frederick Laloux’s book, ‘Reinventing Organisations’ hailing self-managing teams as the next big thing and Tony Hsieh from Zappos lauding ‘Holocracy’s’ benefits as a new system of management. It might come as a bit of a surprise to them that the SAS has always operated along similar lines.

Natural systems usually have an optimum size. I noticed when standing on the skids of helicopters skimming the top of the jungle canopy that trees never grows past a certain point. People can operate at the upper end of their performance in a particular size of group. Experience will show you the optimum size of group you should work with.

Hierarchy has a habit of being shunned in Special Forces and for good reason, ego gets involved. Working in small four or five member, self-managing teams has usually worked best. They may bring a group of teams together on a larger project, but post the mission, they break up back into their original smaller units once again.

**Familiarity counts:** Deep understanding comes from being close and supportive to other team members. This leads to higher performance. Strong relationships form in the Special Forces and it’s a bond that will often last a lifetime. All human systems go through a process of being co-dependent, counter-dependent and then inter-dependent. At that inter-dependent level is where the peak performance is. Having close friends at work according to Gallup adds to life satisfaction to the point that it’s like having a \$100,000 raise. Losing a friend at work feels like experiencing a \$90k cut in salary. Having close friends at work matters on several levels. It’s not just a support network, deep familiarity is also a trigger of *flow* states.

**Sticky and continuous learning:** I was learning long range patrolling skills in the jungles and our instructor was a very seasoned SAS soldier. As the course went on, I soon realised that his considerable reputation was justified. What he didn’t know about fighting covertly in the jungle really didn’t matter. This guy was a ‘*Jedi*’.

The course culminated with us all going on a long range patrol of several days. Being tactical in the jungle means moving slowly and making sure you didn’t leave any ‘sign’ for a potential enemy to track you with. We’d been out for several days and we’d thrown in occasional snap ambushes to try to catch out anybody attempting to track us. We didn’t see anybody and we

were sure nobody could have followed us. As we finished the seventh day of the patrol, we came upon a place we felt we could lay-up. We proceeded to recce the area. I was lead scout and was slowly circling around the potential encampment. I came upon the Instructor when I was around six feet away from him. He was stood still resting his hand on his walking stick smiling. This *ghost* had somehow managed to track us, pass around us without us detecting him, then he lay an ambush for us.

Whist we were having a beer after the course, I plugged the instructor for as much information and knowledge as I could. He was leaving the jungles shortly as his time had come to an end on that particular posting. I asked him what he was off to do next. His answer? “*More training*” He explained that you should never become complacent, life is ever evolving. If change is the only constant, then continual training that's reinforced, that sticks, should be too.

**All Players must have ‘*skin in the game*’:** As Stephen Kotler, Co-Founder of the Flow Genome Project, concludes, risk:

“...causes the mind to stretch its muscles. It creates mandatory conditions for innovation. It trains the brain to think in unusual ways. It trains the brain to be more creative.”

If you want to tap into the collective intelligence and creativity of your team, they must have a sense of ownership. They must realise that they will also feel the pain of defeat as well as the pleasure of success. Perhaps the banking crisis wouldn't have occurred if risk was involved.

There is something about facing 24 hours of interrogation that just seems to make the mind work in a different, more effective way. I had one client who would regularly introduce a fake disaster, such as looming bankruptcy, into the mix just to get the team to “*up*” their game. It worked until they realised what he was doing.

There is a lot to be learnt from the Special Forces mentality and *modus operandi*. Creating a culture which attracts the top talent, training teams to be self-managing, treating people as adults, it all takes a shift in attitude and perspective. It's worth doing though because it unleashes the passion and potential of your team which, will make your company more valuable and sustainable.

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