

Exceptional Team Performance

Horatio Lord Nelson and his "Band of Brothers"

Nelson used the phrase "band of brothers" on many occasions to describe the sense of intense and close comradeship he felt with his captains. He lifted the phrase, of course, from the famous Agincourt speech in his favourite Shakespeare play, Henry V:

"We few, we happy few, we band of brothers;
For he to-day that sheds his blood with me
Shall be my brother"

While serving as a Commodore or Rear Admiral in command of a naval squadron, and then later as a Vice Admiral in command of a Fleet, Nelson took the issue of teamwork very seriously, seeing it as his greatest force enhancer.

He famously said that twelve ships with captains who would put aside their egos to work harmoniously and to synchronise their operations closely as equals were worth more to him than twenty-four ships which might have skilful captains who would not or could not get along.

To get his team co-operating and co-ordinating their efforts Nelson gathered small groups of his captains together almost every evening for dinner on his flagship. Over dinner, and for a relaxing hour or two afterwards, he would gently impart his knowledge and insights, ensuring that his captains knew not only what his overall battle or campaign objective was, but also how best they might play an effective role in its accomplishment. He needed them, he stressed, and would not steal glory from them. Any glory earned was theirs to keep.

Despite his great fame Nelson treated all his subordinate captains and admirals as equals, and devoted much time and enormous effort to creating empathy and bonds of trust. So long as they kept his overall end-state in mind they could, and SHOULD, use their initiative and act according to the dictates of circumstances and opportunities. He would support them and protect them if they erred, or failed, and reward them and advance them if they succeeded.

Nelson delighted in his crews and became friendly and familiar with his officers, knowing them all by name, career experience, and, perhaps most importantly, nature.

In today's terms Nelson preferred being "team captain" to "team coach".

The results were phenomenal. During the Battle of the Nile (1 August 1798) his squadron captains needed no direct guidance. They used hitherto-never-permitted initiative, worked as a tight, cohesive team and fought fiercely and flexibly. Nelson had patiently schooled his team so well in a range of tactical options, and instilled in them a sense of trust and loyalty, that by the time they engaged the French Fleet they were capable of conducting superb manoeuvres without the necessity of centralised command via the slow and awkward signal systems then available. They destroyed the French Fleet with unparalleled

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totality. Nelson and his Band of Brothers fought equally well at Copenhagen (2 April 1801) and, of course, later at Trafalgar (21 October 1805).

"Blood and Guts" Patton and "Opie" Weyland

It is hard to imagine a greater ego than George Smith Patton's, yet after he entered the French campaign on 1 August 1944 he reined in his Everest-sized ego to cooperate as equals with a junior general from another service.

Lt General Patton knew he could achieve wondrous things if could bind his Third Army to a tactical air force as tightly as he had observed German armies and air forces doing during the war's early years. Few air commanders wanted to work with the gruff, hardened warrior. Few thought they could cope with his reported aggression and dominance. Brigadier Otto P. Weyland had the same reservations. Relatively inexperienced, seventeen years Patton's junior and wearer of two less stars than the renowned hero known as "Blood and Guts," Weyland anticipated a nightmare command as GOC, XIX Tactical Air Command, the USAF formation placed in partnership with Third Army.

Yet no bullying or discord occurred. Patton and Weyland bonded immediately, with the former later describing their pairing as "love at first sight". Patton surprised his junior partner by informing him that he, Weyland, had "full control" of all air operations and would be "entirely co-equal" in the planning and execution of joint operations. "Even when we could not converge entirely," Weyland recalled, "the decision was always mine as to how I would allocate the air effort."

XIX Tactical Air Command integrated its efforts magnificently with Third Army's, and actually provided a greater ratio of close air support to interdiction sorties than any other Allied tactical air command of World War II.

Patton loved the limelight yet never hogged it. Even when announcing the final joint offensive in mid-December 1944, Lt General Patton met the Press with his "air partner," Brigadier Weyland. "No operation is contemplated without General Weyland and his staff being present," Patton proudly exclaimed.

This was no mere boast. Patton and Weyland routinely shared headquarters at a time when other partnering air and land commanders seldom met and never created joint points of main effort. Creating and maintaining those "focal points" together became bread and butter to Patton and Weyland, who never saw the differences in the uniforms they wore.

The partnership of the commanders inspired unequalled inter-service harmony and cooperation throughout all levels of their commands. "Our success," Weyland told reporters at one briefing, "is built on mutual respect and comradeship between the air and the ground. ... You can talk to any of my boys about that. ... My boys like the way the Third Army fights. ... They feel that this is their Army."

When asked many years later to explain how Patton and he managed to forge a remarkably cohesive and integrated joint effort, Weyland later explained,

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"George loved glory. That's true. But he had a far greater love: beating our nation's enemies. I shared that same love. Ego never got in the way. As partners and equals we relentlessly pursued the enemy's defeat."

Author

This paper was researched and written by Dr Joel Hayward, Head of Air Power Studies, RAF College Cranwell as part of a study in military examples of exceptional team performance.

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