

# *Training Robust Warfighters for an Agile Air Force*

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The Royal Air Force Future Air and Space Concept describes clearly that to succeed in the future strategic environment the United Kingdom's air power capability must be strategically operationally and tactically agile. In this specific sense, agility has four attributes: responsiveness, robustness, flexibility and adaptability.<sup>2</sup> Delivering a tactically agile air force is first about people and the training and education that they receive. Regardless of the march of technology, warfare, whatever its form, is a human endeavour and we will win only if we bring our people to the fight with the attitude of mind that does not accept second best backed by behaviour that sets the conditions for success. It is the training and education that our people enjoy that shapes their attitude, conditions their behaviour and imbues in them a burning will to win.

In 1941, Churchill famously remarked that every airfield should be a stronghold of fighting airmen prepared to fight and die in defence of their airfields. In essence, he recognized that our airmen

had to be much more than just consummate professionals in their particular disciplines. His dictum lives on today in the strap line, *Warfighter First, Specialist Second*. War fighters are mentally agile, physically robust, self-confident leaders and followers who trust themselves and their comrades. The task facing the Royal Air Force is to train and educate our people such that they can meet this exacting standard. Exposure to Adventurous Training, as an essential component of our Force Development initiative can achieve this. Experience and rigorous academic research demonstrate the validity of this approach. This article will outline the issues we face with our recruits, the lessons of history and experience, the practicality of using Adventurous Training, its aims, structure, resource commitment and an assessment of its perceived value.

## **The human issues we face**

In considering the demands of life in the Royal Air Force versus those of civilian life, we can identify that it is more than just an issue of organizational

culture. Culture undoubtedly serves an important purpose but there are also real practical differences. In the Royal Air Force — a fighting service — an individual's specialist technical skill be it aircrew, caterer, engineer, logistician, must be capable of being applied in the context of a war fighting environment. For example, the Royal Air Force movement team that carried out the offload, refueling and dispatch of transport aircraft on a blacked-out airfield under artillery attack in Kabul in April 2002<sup>3</sup>. Equally, all of our people are required to undertake tasks that fall outside of their primary trade such as guarding or convoy support. Again, to use an example from recent operations in Kabul, when a dozen Royal Air Force firefighters faced up to a hostile crowd of over 300 people to rescue two individuals in danger of being beaten to death<sup>4</sup>.



These people are often very young, the oft-maligned 'youth of today'. Some key statistics define this population. The average 18-year-old today has 10 times the disposable income of his and certainly her, counterpart of 1960. However, this group does not achieve financial independence until the age of 26, as opposed to 18 in 1960. Today, 40% of young people enter higher or tertiary education compared to 19% in 1960, with all of the consequent inevitable challenges to the demographics of the recruiting pool. Today, young people have their imagination stimulated and consequently their expectations expanded by the big world of television, the internet, and newspapers. These media are not necessarily accurate indicators of the real world of work. In consequence, our recruit pool suffers a mismatch between expectation and reality. However, despite this, young people do still join the Service, indicating that there is still a match between their personal ethos and values and those that the Service espouses. We can state with confidence to any recruit that the Royal Air Force offers early financial independence, security, social structure, support and most importantly, identity. The organization clearly meets the individual need. The challenge is to determine how we train and educate the individual to meet the needs of the Service where operations are expeditionary in nature, Joint with the Royal Navy and Army, invariably combined with multinational Allies and where ambiguity in terms of the roles to be performed is the norm. The key issue that faces all Servicemen in modern warfare is ambiguity, the paradigm of the '3 block war', that shifts between combat, peace keeping, peace enforcement and humanitarian assistance in no time at all. Yet many of today's young recruits



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lack any real experience of the hard mental and physical challenge this paradigm demands. Their expectations are all too often media based; their exposure to risk conditioned by the Playstation environment of unlimited energy and immortality. The Service requires them to substitute this vicarious experience for the real life environment and it needs them to do so quickly. Moreover, it is not just a recruit training issue. All of our people must be able to operate in small adaptable teams in environments of increasing complexity and risk.

### **So why Force development (adventurous) training?**

It is a truism that those who ignore the lessons of history are doomed to repeat them. Societies throughout history have identified and overcome this challenge before. Throughout human history, all societies have embraced adventurous, physically and mentally demanding 'rites of passage'. Plato believed that we develop 'the virtues' through active experience and exposure to risk. Yet the paradox is that modern British society, and in particular its educational system, is more risk averse than at any other time in our history. A training gap exists for the modern Royal Air Force. The solution the Service has chosen to follow and needs to develop further has its roots in the school of progressive and experiential education; an area principally influenced by the thinking and teaching of Kurt Hahn. Crucially, we can identify a defining moment when the modern use of adventurous activities as training media emerged, specifically, the story of how the Battle of the Atlantic in World War II led to the establishment of the Outward Bound Movement.

Lawrence Holt, a shipping magnate, identified a problem. Young Merchant Navy seaman of the Blue Funnel Shipping line suffered lower survival rates post a U-Boat attack than their older comrades. He approached Kurt Hahn seeking to redress the issue. Hahn derived an experiential solution that used adventurous activity to equip young sailors with real life experiences that would help to build up their mental and physical resilience. The first Outward Bound programme was run at Aberdovy in 1942. Outward Bound derived its motto 'to serve, to strive and not to

yield' from Tennyson's poem Ulysses — 'The Hero's Journey'. Hahn called Outward Bound the 'moral equivalent of war'. His words resonate today:

*"There is more in us than we know. If we can be made to see it, perhaps, for the rest of our lives we will be unwilling to settle for less."<sup>5</sup>*

An essential tenet of the Outward Bound experience was that it should not be directive or dictatorial. The concept was and still is to develop free thinking, resourceful individuals with a high degree of social awareness and responsibility. Again, Hahn's words resonate:

*'It is the sin of the soul to force young people into opinions — indoctrination is of the devil — but it is culpable neglect not to impel young people into experiences.'<sup>6</sup>*

In the Service, our task is to kindle the spirit of adventure with its components of physical and mental resilience and risk-taking by providing opportunity — the crucial step forward. The Royal Air Force approach to Force Development (adventurous) training reflects this and it has also been influenced by and developed through the schools of experiential education and humanistic psychology. There has been continuous programme development ever since the Royal Air Force opened its first specialist-training centre at Grantown on Spey in 1971.

Established educational theory has identified that adventurous training plays an important role in educating and training people. In terms of experiential education, David Kolb defined a four-stage learning cycle: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation and active experimentation.<sup>7</sup> The United Kingdom educational system and importantly, much of Royal Air Force specialist training concentrates upon only two of these: abstract conceptualisation and active experimentation. Adventurous training programmes use all four, which makes them both effective and memorable. In terms of humanistic psychology, the Service is increasingly turning to the concept of learner centred education, versus

system centred. In such a humanistic approach, the acceptance of personal risk and responsibility in an environment of mutual respect is fundamental. It is clear that such an outcome is wholly in tune with the core values of the Royal Air Force Respect, Integrity, Service and Excellence.

Service personnel engaged in adventurous training also gain health and well-being benefits from undertaking such activities. Even modest bouts of adventurous activity provide psychological advantages. The least fit gain the most advantage from inactivity to modest activity in the outdoor environment. Moreover, the psychological benefits of exercise (stress reduction, enhanced mood, improved self-esteem and self-confidence) are greatly enhanced if completed through the wilderness experience.

#### **The practicality and aims of Force development (adventurous) training**

Adventurous training provides an exceptional experiential training environment. Activities are easily tailored to develop, promote and test leadership, team dynamics and personal development. The medium makes it relatively simple to engineer variable outcomes for differing individuals within the same programme and in a resource constrained environment. Adventurous training activities are easy to organize at varying levels of complexity and are relatively inexpensive when compared to other aspects of technical and operational training. In addition, adventurous training provides practical training in military skills alongside its core life skills training, such as field living, navigation, self-management and a minimalist attitude leading to personal resilience. It is worth noting that minimizing the deployed footprint in expeditionary operations is a problem currently uppermost in the minds of military planners. The degree of support required by our people in adverse environments can even influence the decision to commit or not. British Servicemen have long rejoiced in the epithet the 'Flintstones' amongst our Allies for their ability to do more and live with less.



RAF Force Development through the medium of adventurous training has the following aims:

**Leadership Training.** The use of real scenarios with demonstrable consequences that involve the management of live risk and ambiguity. In addition, we seek the development of our leaders' conceptual skills, those of judgment and creativity.

**Team Development.** An understanding of team dynamics and team performance in a testing environment requiring a resourceful and collective approach.

**Personal Development.** The challenging of individual perception and behaviours to realise personal potential. In addition, the development of 'human factor' skills relevant to the Service: resilience, self-awareness, self-efficacy, communication skills, determination, courage, resourcefulness, humility, followership and social responsibility.

#### **The training structure**

The Royal Air Force structures the use of adventurous training as a medium in two ways:

**1. Formal Training.** Formal Training involves the use of specific syllabi for specified Phase One (recruit) and Phase Two (specialist trade) courses.

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Initial Officer Training delivers two of its leadership phases through adventurous training. The first is a self-awareness week (*before you lead others, you must lead yourself*) run in Snowdonia. The second is a week of applied leadership (*the Hero's Journey*) based upon an extended self-supported expedition through the Scottish highlands.

Royal Air Force personnel undertake a resource and initiative training course during their Phase 2 specialist training.

**2. Informal Training.** Service Force Development training, a command led activity, aims to develop operational capability beyond the confines of trade specific training. It uses adventurous training in its leadership, ethos and collective training domains. In addition, the Service runs a partially public funded scheme to encourage personnel to organize and undertake adventurous training activities on a voluntary basis.

**Resource commitment**

The primary Service commitment to Force Development (adventurous) training is through its specialist, uniformed, Physical Education specialization. There are 122 formally qualified Adventurous Training Instructors throughout the Service. Forty are employed at three Force Development Training Centres: Crickhowell, Grantown on Spey and Fairbourne. These centres offer 3,500 spaces per year for five-day training programmes. In addition, individuals throughout the Service can acquire adventurous trainings qualifications in specified disciplines on a voluntary basis.

The development of the uniformed instructor cadre has been crucial to the success of our training strategy. The role of the instructor/facilitator is integral to effective delivery. They are able to provide both the adventurous training experience and the vital contextual link to the operational environment.



The Royal Air Force enjoys significant advantages over civilian providers of this style of training, albeit direct comparison is difficult. Our pool of programme leaders are already formally trained Physical Training Instructors — our Physical Education specialization. This Branch enjoys a good retention rate justifying the investment in each individual instructor's adventurous training skills. We are thus able to field an instructor cadre that has both the technical competencies and coaching skills to deliver the desired level of physical challenge and conceptual depth. Such training takes some years to acquire and both the qualifications and practice are continuously benchmarked against the requirements of the Adventurous Activities Licensing Authority and the Adult Learning Inspectorate. Significantly, many of our training interventions occur whilst our personnel are in the formative stages of their training. This affords a unique opportunity to imbue a strong sense of our Service values and our culture. At an impressionable period in the development of our people, the instructor cadre — air minded and operationally experienced — provides exemplary role models.

In addition to this, each station in the Royal Air Force deploys a Force Development Squadron, which promotes the concepts described at unit level. Station commanders are subject to a performance indicator that requires 15% of their personnel to undertake some form of adventurous training each year. This is commonly exceeded.

#### Perceived value

No military activity today is immune from the most rigorous and regular scrutiny to confirm its continued relevance. Force Development (adventurous) training has been extensively researched from a variety of perspectives: corporate, educational, therapeutic and military. Some key findings for the service have looked at:

**Psychological Resiliency.** Neill and Dias<sup>8</sup> showed that in the face of stressful events, the existence of a social support group could have a positive effect on individual resilience. The practical testing of this factor, through experiencing an adventurous training programme, leads to a transferable belief

in self-efficacy and the team unity.

**Longevity of Training Outcome.** Hattie et al<sup>9</sup> demonstrated that there was a significant longevity of benefit from the outcomes of adventurous training compared to non-experiential and indoor based programmes. During Operation FINGAL in Kabul, it is worth recording that the five key executives in the Royal Air Force deployed operating base command chain had enjoyed regular exposure to adventurous training. One had been commended for his bravery and leadership during the rescue of an injured climber on an expedition to climb Mount Acongagua in Chile.

Aggregating a wealth of published research reveals the following potential benefits from Force Development (adventurous) training:

Psychological	Sociological	Practical	Physical
<i>Self-concept</i>	<i>Respect for others</i>	<i>Leadership</i>	<i>Fitness</i>
<i>Confidence</i>	<i>Group cooperation</i>	<i>Problem solving</i>	<i>Skills</i>
<i>Self efficacy</i>	<i>Communication</i>	<i>Value clarification</i>	<i>Strength</i>
<i>Actualization</i>	<i>Behaviour feedback</i>	<i>Field skills</i>	<i>Coordination</i>
<i>Well-being</i>	<i>Compassion</i>	<i>Improved academics</i>	<i>Catharsis</i>
<i>Personal testing</i>	<i>Friendship</i>		<i>Exercise</i>
	<i>Belonging</i>	<i>Environmental awareness</i>	<i>Balance</i>

However, perhaps the most powerful assessment of the training value comes from the Servicemen and women who have undertaken this training. These are our war fighters; they are being tested daily in Iraq, Afghanistan, Sierra Leone and the Balkans to name but a few of the world's hot spots. The mental and physical agility to cope in adversity is vital, as is the discipline and restraint demanded by what General Rupert Smith has

recently described as the new paradigm in post-industrial warfare — war amongst the people.<sup>10</sup> There is overwhelming evidence that exposing our Service men and women to rigorous, challenging adventurous programmes that by design involve significant real physical risk, develops the attitudes, behaviours and above all the determination to win that marks us out from the rest.

*“The course was not what I had expected. There was a thinking side to all the activities and I thoroughly enjoyed the end of the day reflection sessions.”*

*“I have found it a valuable experience and an opportunity to get involved in a risk environment with a team of people I did not necessarily know well.”*

*“I was surprised at what I was capable of and will have more respect for my own abilities and trust in my team mates.”*

*“The activities certainly met their aim of being more ‘real life’ orientated than a lot of my other RAF training.”*

*“I certainly learned things about myself on the high ropes day and I learned how to deal with anxiety in an alien environment.”*

**Notes:**

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<sup>2</sup> UKFASOC, p2.

<sup>3</sup> RAF Leadership Anthology, p.109.

<sup>4</sup> op cit p.108.

<sup>5</sup> This was one of Hahn’s fundamental aphorisms and a tenet that he used as a motto “plus est en vous”.

<sup>6</sup> Address by Dr. Kurt Hahn at the Annual Meeting of the Outward Bound Trust on 20th July, 1960

<sup>7</sup> Kolb D A (1984) Experiential Learning: experience as the source of learning and development New Jersey: Prentice-Hall

<sup>8</sup> Neil J T & Dias K L (2001). Adventure education and resilience: The double-edged sword. Journal of Adventure Education and Outdoor Learning, 1, 35-42

<sup>9</sup> Hattie J. Marsh, H. Neil T & Richards G (1997) Adventure Education and Outward Bound: Out-of-class experiences that have a lasting effect. Review of Education Research, 67, 43-87.

<sup>10</sup> Smith, General Sir Rupert, The Utility of Force, (Allen Lane, 2005).

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