

GeoThreat Report

Major General H. Kippenberger

A Study in the New Zealand Style of Command



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SAMPLE REPORT

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Part A - Introduction

The New Zealand soldier during World War II represented the raw epitome of early 20th Century New Zealand's isolation, size and unique societal makeup. From citizen soldier to hardened veteran, courageous, independent and adaptable the New Zealand soldier fought and died with his mates. This Kiwi character required a special kind of command style to unlock these hidden fighting qualities. Major General Sir Howard Kippenberger possessed the key that unlocked these qualities, which when reflected in command style possessed New Zealand uniqueness.

This report will produce an analysis of Kippenberger's command style in order to identify unique elements that contribute to a New Zealand command style. Kippenberger will be examined before, during and after World War II in which his leadership characteristics and behaviours will be related to an integrated framework of leadership. This framework will provide an anchor for this analysis within which Kippenberger's command picture will be developed.

The integrated framework of leadership uses the inter-related concepts of previous leadership theories to produce a model that has utility within a variety of settings in order to determine leadership effectiveness. Each of the following components interacts with one or more of the other components:

- Leader Characteristics, for example courage,
- Leadership power, for example coercive power,
- Leadership behaviour, for example problem-solving,
- Situational variables, for example variables that constrain leadership behaviour,
- Intervening variables, for example leadership behaviour that influences the end-result,
- End-result variables, for example leadership effectiveness.

Part B - Preparation for Command

Howard Kippenberger was born 1897 in Ladbrook South of Christchurch. An intelligent child with little patience for school and no wish to follow his parents into farming joined the New Zealand army in 1915 and soon found himself embroiled with NZEF (New Zealand Expeditionary Force) training in preparation to enter World War I.

Kippenberger (Herein Kip) tasted battle for the first time in 1916 during his three weeks on the Somme taking part in three assaults and watching his Canterbury regiment being decimated amongst conditions in which the soldier's life became pawns for detached rearward commanders who would rarely go forward. Seeing his friends die and observing the callous nature of rearward commanders Kip began to develop characteristics in which the care and well being of his men would always be a priority¹. After the Somme Kip became a battalion sniper and was soon wounded ironically by New Zealand artillery. Kip's exposure to the reality of war had ended after only 10 weeks and he returned to New Zealand with a well developed self-esteem, maturity, and stress tolerance all characteristics that would translate directly into command characteristics. Kip had also developed a fascination with war and through the pursuit of knowledge would see a young Kip develop during the 1920s - 1930s into an amateur historian and novice commander.

During the inter war period Kip stayed active in military affairs. In addition to becoming a barrister and city councillor he built up a war library of military texts, which he studied ferociously, analysing battles and campaigns. According to Harper he was obsessed with numbers of men, quantities of equipment and casualty figures and discovered the importance and correlation of effective military leadership and moral². Using his own experiences of World War 1 leadership combined with extensive reading Kip determined leadership by example, exercising coolness under

¹ Harper, G., *Kippenberger, An Inspired New Zealand Commander*, Auckland, New Zealand: HarperCollins, 1997, p. 41.

² Harper (1997), p. 51.

fire and the optimum positioning of command head quarters were all vital features of leadership behaviour, which contributed to effective leadership.

Kip did not remain an armchair general during the inter war period but managed to turn theory into practice after being commissioned into the T.F. (Territorial Force) in 1924. At the outbreak of World War II Kip at the age of 42 had seen the ups and downs of the New Zealand Army while in the T.F. and had also developed the pragmatic and result orientated attitude that was necessary leadership behaviour within a task orientated environment. Kip was about to see first hand that “...command on the battlefield itself was the best school and best test”³.

³ Harper, G., ‘Major General Sir H. Kippenberger, Preparation for Command’, in *The New Zealand Army Journal*, 1996, December, pp. 48-67, p. 64.

Part C - Kippenberger's Military and Post War Career

General Freyberg commander of 2NZEF (2nd New Zealand Expeditionary Force) recruited Lieutenant Colonel Kippenberger to command the 20th Canterbury battalion. Kip was immediately faced with two situational variables that would influence his leadership effectiveness throughout his term with 2NZEF.

First Freyberg had a charter drawn up in which he was the ultimate command authority on 2NZEF deployment. The charter allowed Freyberg to act as the 2NZEF guardian angel to ensure the casualty debacle of World War 1 was not repeated. 2NZEF could therefore act in an autonomous mode where necessary, which became particularly useful during battles such as Cassino when casualties started piling up. The charter would also act negatively as Freyberg became increasingly casualty shy and would ultimately influence some important battles.

Second the New Zealand soldiers of 2NZEF produced a collective identity derived from the societal environment of New Zealand. The New Zealand soldier had an initiative born out of individualness developed from a perceived egalitarian social structure. The mateship within this structure provided for an extra strong cohesion in which he only respects officers who are like himself. This was the psyche that Kip would have to appeal tempered by the influence of Freyberg. During the next 4 years of active campaigning in Greece-Crete, North Africa-Egypt, North Africa-Libya and Italy Kip would be tasked into becoming an effective New Zealand commander.

2NZEF arrived in Greece on 6th March 1941 after training in Egypt for over one year. The Greece campaign became a strategic disaster for the allied forces as the German Blitzkrieg rolled through Greece and ended up being dominated by rearguard actions. Kip was heavily involved with these rearguard actions in which his coolness under pressure and control of retreating troops was exemplary. He also came to realise how a moment's tactical lapse against such an aggressive foe would be punished swiftly when he allowed his battalion to travel in the open exposed to

German airpower resulting in 32 casualties⁴. Kip tended to learn from his mistakes and would often not repeat them. On the 26th April Kip was evacuated to Crete where he met up with the rest of 2NZEF.

Crete was known as a “Paupers Campaign”⁵. The New Zealanders arrived with little more than their personal weapons and along with Australian, British and Greek troops were to defend Crete under the command of General Freyberg. Kip was promoted to colonel and put in charge of both the Greek 10th Brigade and his 20th Battalion. On 20th May 1941 the Germans carried out an airborne invasion and the outcome of the battle was fairly much decided by the third day after the critical airfield of Maleme was lost⁶. Kip showed enormous courage and robustness during this campaign, twisting his ankle early on while going one on one with a German paratrooper. Again his men were faced with rearguard actions but Kip’s effective command style came to the fore during a counter attack at Galatos in what could arguably be Kip’s greatest demonstration of leadership effectiveness.

Galatos was a small village between Canea and Maleme and a pivotal point on the defensive line. This point had been breached and a counter attack was organized by Kip on the 25th May 1941. Preceding this counter attack Kip using his leadership power had rallied soldiers on the verge of routing by yelling, “Stand for New Zealand!”⁷ The counter attack was carried out under numerous negative situational variables. Morale was deteriorating with constant air attacks and the realisation that defeat was inevitable. The cohesiveness of the New Zealand troops was becoming unglued. Kip appealed to the psyche of the New Zealand soldier by offering a chance to strike back or “...have a crack at the Hun”⁸. Kip instigated an unconstrained bayonet charge knowing very well it was a weapon of morale and would inject a blood lust into the New Zealand soldiers. Both of these preceding factors could be

⁴ Kippenberger, Major General Sir H.K., *Infantry Brigadier*, London: Oxford University Press, 1949, p. 43.

⁵ Harper (1997), p. 86.

⁶ Harper (1997), p. 90.

⁷ Kippenberger (1949), p. 65.

⁸ McLeod, J., *Myth and Reality, The New Zealand Soldier in World War II*, Auckland, New Zealand: Reed Methuen Publishers Ltd, 1986, p. 100.

considered intervening variables instigated by Kip to reunify and recommit the soldiers. The end-result of both appealing to the New Zealand psyche and using speed and surprise caught the Germans by surprise forcing them to retreat demoralised. Crete inevitably fell on June 1st with Kip one of the last ones off on May 30th. Kip received the DSO (Distinguished Service Order) for his exploits on Crete and was soon to see much more fighting in North Africa.

Kip's experience in Egypt during the North African campaign reflected a steep learning curve in his command effectiveness. The battles for Belhamed Ridge during Operation Crusader in November 1941, Minqar Qaim in June 1942, Ruweissat Ridge in July, Alam Halfa during August – September, Miteiriya Ridge in October, and Halfaya pass in November 1942 were mostly beset by faulty doctrine and to a large degree 2NZEF discovering itself as a fighting unit. Kip demonstrated his resiliency during this period being wounded, captured and then escaping during the battle of Belhamed Ridge during which time he witnessed his beloved 20th battalion being overrun. He also made critical command mistakes particularly at Ruweissat Ridge where he suffered the consequences of miscommunication and mismanagement, which contributed to the mission's heavy casualties. Kip also demonstrated a great oratory before Belhamed Ridge and Miteiriya Ridge and even after his promotion to Brigade commander of 5th brigade was still aware of the importance of visibility to his men. At the end of this campaign Kip was an experienced commander who had gained his men's loyalty and would next demonstrate his tactical flair during the upcoming Libyan campaign in North Africa.

Kip's experience of the Libyan campaign was dominated by more successful offensive actions as the Africa Korps entered retreat mode. But in a sense this success became a restraining factor. Freyberg became increasingly casualty shy constraining 2NZEF operations in stark contrast to the bolder nature of commanders such as Kip who thrived on greater command independence. This campaign was dominated by three left hook operations in which 2NZEF participated. The first to outflank El Agheila in December 1942, the second, the battle for Tripoli in January

1943 and finally the battle of Mareth in March 1943. During the first left hook, Freyberg twice overrode Kip, each at times when the Afrika Korps was vulnerable⁹. The second left hook was again dominated by Freyberg's cautiousness at Tebaga Gap, which perhaps provoked a degree of selective disobedience to creep into Kip's command style. The third left hook saw Kip's 5th Brigade in pursuit mode overrunning the town of Gabes in violation of Freyberg's order to bypass it. Perhaps Kip's last battle in Libya at Takrouna during April 1943 represents a culmination of said situational factors upon a command style that had so far demonstrated a preference for tactical independence and loyalty for his men.

Takrouna was a 400 to 500 feet natural obstacle well protected except for a gentle rear-facing slope. It was located in a hilly area of Tunisia and along with peak Djebel Garcia dominated the coastal plains. Situational variables that included transitioning from flat dessert to hilly terrain, underestimating the commitment of the defenders, and poor intelligence did not constrain Kip's planning. He planned for an attack behind a poorly timed creeping barrage not allowing any form of reserve and only designating a single company to make the key assault. All of these were ultimately failures in leadership behaviour and would negatively influence the attack particularly the creeping barrage which Kip later stated: "...was much too fast for the heavy going through the olive groves, and cactus hedges, and accordingly our whole programme was thrown out."¹⁰ The end-result was a disorganised attack as units ran into killing grounds of enfilading fire. With more luck than leadership a Maori platoon gallantly seized the pinnacle of Takarouna. Kip displayed numerous command weaknesses particularly his failure to recognise and adapt tactically to Takrouna and the surrounding terrain. With around 500 casualties he also appeared to be somewhat detached from how mistakes at the Brigade level had more far ranging consequences than compared to the battalion level¹¹. Kip's next arena of operations would be Italy where he would take on an even greater role as Divisional commander of 2NZEF during Cassino.

⁹ Harper (1997), p. 201.

¹⁰ Kippenberger (1949), p. 304.

¹¹ Kippenberger (1949), p. 314.

2NZEF landed in Italy on 3rd September 1943 with Kip following in November after returning from furlough in New Zealand. Kip and his 5th Brigade were immediately thrust into action at the battle for Orsogna during December 1943. This was followed by Cassino in February 1944 for which Kip was promoted temporarily to Major General to command 2NZEF while Freyberg became Cassino's overall Corp commander. Kip attacked Cassino on February 18th and was very nearly successful in capturing it. Freyberg then proposed another plan which Kip vehemently challenged threatening to resign if ordered to carry it out. As Harper states: "This was a dereliction of duty on Kip's part." It went beyond selective disobedience and "...it was his duty to do everything possible as GOC to ensure the plans success"¹². Resigning would have been disastrous for the morale of 2NZEF. Kip did not resign but unfortunately before the plan could be implemented he stepped on a German mine requiring the amputation of his legs. March 2nd 1944 marked the end of Kip's combat career but it also began an influential post war career in public service.

After only a couple of months of recuperation Kip was back at it promoted to a substantial Major General and put in charge of 1NZEF reception group based in Britain from October 1944 thru September 1945. In 1946 he became editor in chief of the War Histories, and then became President of the (RSA) Returned Serviceman's Association during which time he was made a KBE (Knight of the British Empire). Throughout this period Kip continued to show loyalty to his fellow soldiers and it's noteworthy on Kip's part that in his memoirs he was honest yet respectful when it came to portraying the New Zealand soldier and Freyberg¹³. He also stuck to his principles, which led to conflicts within the RSA and in the public sector but his bullheadedness was part of a unique quality he had developed while serving in World War II and was leadership behaviour among many others difficult to unlearn.

¹² Harper (1997), p. 260.

¹³ *Infantry Brigadier* was published in 1949 and according to *The Oxford Companion to New Zealand History* became a best seller. It has been translated into other languages and has earned a place in staff colleges around the world.

Part D - Kippenberger's Strengths and Weaknesses

Kip had numerous strengths that made him an effective New Zealand commander. His primary leadership characteristics were physical courage, intelligence, robustness and military knowledge. Yet his Kiwi upbringing provided mannerisms that allowed these to be translated into leadership behaviours that projected over his men. Kip acted in such a way as to minimise status differentials but not to an extent ill discipline predominated. He demonstrated his competence through knowledge and example exercising a coolness that gained the respect of his soldiers. His expertise in maintaining group unity and consequently morale gave him a power that relied on an overt loyalty he automatically assumed for his men. Kip also exercised a streak of independence employed as selective disobedience in what can be described as probably a New Zealand leadership behaviour born from the natural initiative of the New Zealand soldier. Kip put this behaviour to good use when opportunities arose and to this extent was probably why Freyberg tolerated his occasional disobedience.

Kip unfortunately was not the 'Holy Grail' of commanders. Among his leadership characteristics he appeared to lack an element of moral courage perhaps best demonstrated when he failed to relieve a commander he had known since Crete who had lost his nerve during the battle of the El Mreir depression in June 1942¹⁴. Yet while commander of 5th Brigade during the December 1944 battle for Orsogna in Italy Kip relieved an officer when his platoon failed to take the battlefield¹⁵. This contradiction certainly raises a question mark regarding Kip's true moral courage. Among leadership behaviours Kip seemed to have a degree of tactical weakness demonstrated at the battle for Takrouna and also an excessive disregard for authority especially when questioning Freyberg at Cassino. Perhaps one of his most significant weaknesses was his belief he had to take unnecessary risks in order to be seen as an example to his fellow soldiers. This led to some close calls including being wounded and finally the career ending mine incident. These were unnecessary risks that ultimately removed a crucial commander on the eve of a critical battle.

¹⁴ Harper (1997), p. 284.

¹⁵ McLeod (1986), p. 78.

Part E - Conclusion

Major General Sir Howard Kippenberger demonstrated an effective command style that had elements unique to a New Zealand style of command. The New Zealand soldier is recognised as an independent individual in which unity and morale is built upon both mateship and egalitarianism. Too effectively command requires an approach that treats the soldier as an individual, not a number. By minimising status differentials, demonstrating through example and knowledge, keeping the individual informed and showing integrity the New Zealand commander earns his followers loyalty. Most importantly and probably one of the most difficult requirements for commanding New Zealand troops requires being one of the boys and still maintaining a degree of separation. Developing camaraderie is easy to obtain for New Zealanders but for the New Zealand commander to maintain loyalty requires a substance that is not maintained by rank, coercion or charisma. Major General Sir Howard Kippenberger had this substance.

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