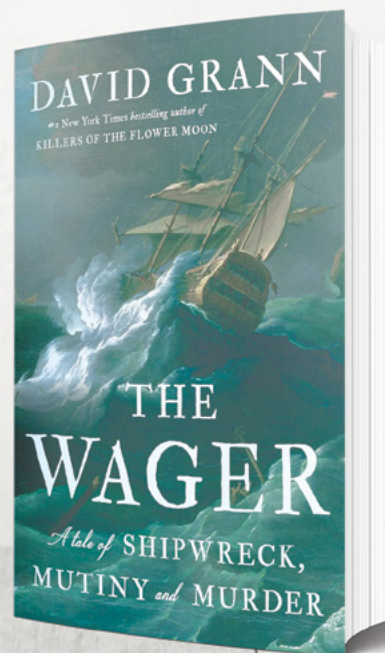


The Wager

A Tale of Shipwreck, Mutiny and Murder



David Grann, Doubleday, New York, 2023,
352 pages

Maj. Richard R. G. Brantley, U.S. Army

The British Navy was known for its ability to coalesce fractious individuals into ... a “band of Brothers.” But the Wager had an unusual number of unwilling and troublesome crewman ... [none] could ... yet know for certain the true nature lurking inside his fellow seamen or even himself: a long, dangerous voyage inexorably exposed one’s hidden soul.

—David Grann, *The Wager*

Judge advocates, and more broadly, service members, often hyperfocus on contemporary accounts of American soldiers for lessons on leadership. While there is nothing inherently wrong with this approach, this narrow scope has the risk of our leaders missing out on important lessons from the service members who have come before us. The history of other nations and branches of service can hold the key to many leadership lessons from which any leader could benefit. One such book, *The Wager: A Tale of Shipwreck, Mutiny and Murder* by David Grann, provides an illuminating picture of many military challenges described by British naval personnel.¹ *The Wager* tells the story of the doomed expedition of British Commodore George Anson during the War of Jenkins’ Ear (1739–1748), during which their mission was to raid the Spanish

treasure galleon that would set sail every year from Mexico to the Philippines to bring King Philip V’s silver to the Chinese market.² Frustrating this critical part of the Spanish trade economy was a key goal of the British government in the opening phases of the war; however, this entire misadventure would set His Majesty’s Ship (HMS) *Wager* on a rendezvous with disaster.³

Grann’s account of the struggles suffered at the end of the world by the crew of HMS *Wager* is full of powerful lessons that can inform the actions of the modern military leader. *The Wager* exemplifies the core leadership lessons found in Army Publishing Doctrine (ADP) 6-22, *Army Leadership and the Profession*.⁴ The story of the HMS *Wager*’s crew and officers corps can demonstrate how to lead as a paragon, how to use competency-based leadership, and how to best implement these skills at organizational and strategic levels; for these reasons, it is a critical addition to any leader’s bookshelf.⁵

The Army Leader: Person of Character, Presence, and Intellect

The misadventures of HMS *Wager* can teach service members how to lead as a paragon of leadership ability. Throughout *The Wager*, there are numerous examples of Capt. David Cheap’s crew demonstrating and failing



Capt. David Cheap was in command of HMS *Wager* when it wrecked in May 1741 on the shores of Wager Island in Chilean Patagonia. After the wreck, the already unpopular commander's crew would not follow his instructions. (Artwork courtesy of Wikimedia Commons)

to demonstrate “critical attributes” the Army expects its leaders to embody: good character, presence, and intellect in support of critical missions and objectives.⁶

Many lessons on character are found in the study of opposites presented by Warrant Officer John Bulkeley and Alexander Campbell.⁷ The Royal Navy, much like any modern organization, possessed a wide spectrum of unique individuals.⁸ While the Royal Navy often relied on impressment, there were also some volunteers; all of these men can show the modern Army leader why their soldiers serve.⁹ This insight might even assist the Army with solving some of its current recruitment challenges.

While the Army hopes its soldiers choose to serve their Nation out of selfless service, it is perhaps naïve to think that this is their only motivation.¹⁰ The majority of the *Wager*'s crew had been impressed into service.¹¹ For these men, Bulkeley's tendency to deeply involve himself in the day-to-day tasks on the ship earned him a stellar reputation, even among the most unwilling conscripts.¹² Bulkeley had mastered “the dark arts of

gunnery ... he knew the precise point on a cresting wave when a crew ... should ... fire. He expertly mixed cartridges and packed grenades with corn powder” alongside his men.¹³ Bulkeley was trustworthy enough to command a watch.¹⁴ He epitomized the leader of character who inspires his men through direct example and sharing in their hardships.

In contrast, Campbell's always temperamental, overbearing tyrannical approach was a character failure.¹⁵ Campbell relied on his status as an officer and brute force to ensure compliance with the captain's orders.¹⁶ Campbell may have maintained temporary order, but he was not respected.¹⁷ These two men show that soldiers, conscript or not, need inspirational leadership.¹⁸ “A person's character affects how they lead”—these values guide the leader's conscience and shape unit culture, which is in the leader's keeping.¹⁹ Service members must be able to put their good character into practice by finding moral solutions to a diverse problem set, keeping their soldiers' needs always in mind and never losing sight of the human element.²⁰ *The Wager* is a great source for lessons in good and bad character.

“The Army expects all Army members to look and act as professionals ... through their presence leaders show what they stand for and how they expect others to carry themselves.”²¹ Such patriotic sentiment inspired the men of the *Wager* to great feats. One such example is through the last command of Adm. Horatio Nelson, which was spoken in the arms of his fellow officers as he lay dying from a French sniper fire: “England expects every officer and man to do his duty this day.”²² Such military presence, even in death, echoes through time immemorial and is embodied in ADP 6-22.

The Wager offers numerous examples of service members demonstrating presence in the most troubling circumstances. An early example of a young midshipman, John Byron, being forced to demonstrate their presence to their men occurred when they first heard the call, “Aloft you go!”²³ Every young judge advocate (JA) will benefit from recalling Byron's journey up the

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George Anson, 1st Baron Anson, by Thomas Hudson, before 1748, oil on canvas, 127 x 101.5 cm, National Maritime Museum. Anson is an example of competency-based leadership in practice. He won the loyalty of his men by actively taking part in day-to-day tasks and mastering them. (Artwork courtesy of Wikimedia Commons)

mainmast as they step out into the well during their first court-martial. During such stressful times, coolness under pressure and resilience are the hallmarks of necessary presence that every leader must demonstrate.²⁴ Leaders demonstrate presence by carrying themselves with confidence and competence, and by setting a positive example for others to emulate.²⁵

“Intellect is fundamental to successful leadership ... [and it] consists of one’s brainpower and knowledge,” it enables leaders to think creatively to make sound judgments and solve problems.²⁶ Woe betide the service members and JAs who forget this pivotal lesson. Grann’s compelling narrative makes a strong case that none of the marooned crew of the *Wager* would have survived the shipwreck without their intellect.²⁷

“It is a mistaken notion that any blockhead will make a seamen ... I don’t know one situation in life that requires so accomplished an education as the sea officer,” [one British captain explained] ... he should be a man of

letters and languages, a mathematician, and an accomplished gentleman.²⁸

The Judge Advocate General Corps requires nothing less of its officers, as demonstrated by the eight different forms of professional military education and the baseline law degree and bar certification currently included in the “Judge Advocate Schooling Plan.”²⁹ If Byron hadn’t kept a copy of Sir John Narborough’s chronicle of his journey through Patagonia, none of the men would have escaped, as both parties of survivors relied on it to plot their way back to England.³⁰ The officers of the *Wager* had the intellectual wherewithal to not only bring available intelligence on the local area with them but also to carefully study it and implement it, demonstrating the importance of the intellect dimension of leadership.³¹ Narborough’s chronicle is analogous to the “war stories” that JAs tell each other in their downtime; they have the utility of passing along past successes to the next generation of leaders, becoming a useful tool in the practice of military law.

The attributes of character, presence, and intellect are the critical foundation upon which the leader can develop their leadership philosophy.³² In the pages of *The Wager*, invaluable lessons on each of these three dimensions can be found.

Competency-Based Leadership

The Wager presents numerous examples of leaders with various degrees of competency that can provide lessons to modern leadership. Army leaders are expected to lead others, develop their subordinates, and accomplish all assigned and implied missions. These core skills together drive what is called competency-based leadership.³³ As quoted within ADP 6-22, Gen. Omar N. Bradley said it best: “The American soldier ... demands professional competence in his leaders. ... [From the sergeants to the officers] the American soldier expects his [leaders] to teach him how to do his job.”³⁴ Like modern American soldiers, eighteenth-century British sailors also demanded the same competency from their officers.³⁵

Grann’s description of the conflict between Cheap and Bulkeley can help modern leaders learn critical lessons about the competency component of leadership. Cheap’s demands for obedience constantly relied upon his authority as a member of the formal chain of command, whereas Bulkeley won over the men’s

Anson's voyage around the world



The path of the Commodore George Anson's HMS *Centurion* during the War of Jenkins' Ear. Anson's squadron of eight ships, including the HMS *Wager*, were on a mission to raid the Spanish treasure galleon that would set sail annually from Mexico to the Philippines to bring King Philip V's silver to the Chinese market. This adventure would ultimately end in disaster. (Map courtesy of Wikimedia Commons)

loyalty through building influence without the need to invoke his authority as a member of the chain of command.³⁶ Bulkeley's intelligence and competency, as well as the crew's lingering resentment around how Cheap failed to navigate the *Wager* around the rocks of Wager Island, continuously undermined Cheap's ability to rely purely on the military chain of command to maintain his captaincy.³⁷ All JAs and service members must note how Cheap's command fell apart. If you have not built informal influence around a shared purpose as Bulkeley did, soldiers may disobey your lawful orders at the decisive moment of crisis.³⁸ Outside the formal chain of command, it is very important to build networks with your coworkers by engaging in their interests, understanding their diverse cultures and belief systems, and letting them see you work on the mission alongside them.³⁹ Informal leadership of this sort will support mission accomplishment and meet the objectives of your staff judge advocate.⁴⁰

On the other side of the leadership ledger, Commodore George Anson is a good example of competency-based leadership put into practice. Anson was not held in esteem by English high society, which mocked

his taciturn nature and refusal to carry out a more lively correspondence.⁴¹ However, his lackluster reputation at home was completely overshadowed by the love and loyalty of his men, who regarded him as a commander who "understood that the secret to establishing command was not tyrannizing men, but convincing, sympathizing, and inspiring them."⁴² In an office climate, it is not always as important whether your peers think highly of you but rather whether you have the trust of your soldiers. During the HMS *Centurion's* journey around the world, Anson put on a master class in leading by example, "join[ing] in the toil, putting himself, as one of the men recalled it, on the same level as the meanest sailor in his crew."⁴³ Again, much like Bulkeley, Anson won the loyalty of his men by taking part in their day-to-day tasks and mastering them.⁴⁴ If a JA is not actively participating and competent in what they ask their paralegals to do then how can they expect those paralegals to be committed to their lawful orders? Leading by example and doing so competently, as Anson did, is one of the best ways to seek the high ground of leadership and demonstrate the morals and ethics soldiers expect of their leaders and the Nation expects of its officer corps.⁴⁵



Brig. Gen. Maurice Barnett, 10th Army Air and Missile Defense Command commanding general, speaks to air defenders during a mentorship program hosted by 5th Battalion, 7th Air Defense Artillery Regiment, on 11 April 2024 in Baumholder, Germany. Army leaders are expected to lead others, develop their subordinates, and accomplish all assigned and implied missions. Together, these core skills become the framework for competency-based leadership. As Gen. Omar Bradley said, "The American soldier ... demands professional competence in his leaders. ... [From the sergeants to the officers] the American soldier expects his [leaders] to teach him how to do his job." (Photo by Sgt. Yesenia Cadavid, U.S. Army)

When JAs fail to build informal networks and do not lead by example in their practice, they undermine their ability to deliver results for their chain of command and produce inferior results. Cheap's failures are best avoided, and Anson's successes are emulated.⁴⁶

Leading at Organizational and Strategic Levels

The JA, like any military officer, is not only required to lead at the tactical level, in the courtroom, or the office of a staff judge advocate but also to someday lead at a strategic level.⁴⁷ *The Wager* is a useful tool because it provides evidence of leadership at all levels from the shores of Wager Island to Anson's final victory over the Covadogna.⁴⁸ Taken together, the critical leadership traits and skills demonstrated in the seas of the Pacific by the men of Anson's squadron convey innumerable leadership lessons on an organizational level that, if implemented, would benefit any office or unit.

"Strategic leadership involves the activities to affect the achievement of a desirable and clearly understood

vision ... [and] thoroughly understand[ing] political-military relationships."⁴⁹ Grann's *The Wager* provides glimpses into the foreign policy of the British Empire during the War of Jenkins' Ear, which should remind any service member that they do not exist in a tactical vacuum but as tools to implement political policy objectives; especially in the context of strategic JA operations, national policies are of paramount importance.⁵⁰ Anson never lost sight of this; by the time the *Centurion* had reached the Pacific Ocean, over 90 percent of the men he originally set out with had perished to the elements, scurvy, and famine—only 227 remained of the full complement of two thousand.⁵¹ Anson knew that his orders to circumnavigate the globe and frustrate Spain still held despite the suffering his men had endured on their journey.⁵² Anson doubtless had determined from his regional reconnaissance that his expedition remained the last and best chance for the Royal Navy to redeem itself in the eyes of the public.⁵³ Anson demonstrated a keen understanding of his role in contemporary British foreign policy—the stakes couldn't have been higher,

and such an operation indicates strategic leadership.⁵⁴ Failure would have been a total disaster for the British government. However, Anson's successful interdiction of the Cavadogna was a public relations coup for the British government, as demonstrated by his Caesarian triumphal parade down the streets of London.⁵⁵ Senior JAs and Army leaders need to see the bigger picture and ensure that their efforts are well nested with the priorities of higher headquarters, from the brigade to the combatant command level.⁵⁶

Anson also demonstrated a great aptitude for developing his sailors in the context of strategic leadership; this means "investing in subordinates with a long-term focus. [Creating] the conditions for long term success by ... develop[ing] subordinates who can continue to improve the institution."⁵⁷ In a word, it was mentorship. The Judge Advocate General Corps has continuously emphasized the importance of mentorship, Judge Advocate Legal Services Publication 1-1, *Personnel Policies*, mentions it at least four times.⁵⁸ JAs need to invest in the next generation of leadership and ensure they leave any organization they belong to better than when they arrived.⁵⁹ *The Wager* provides innumerable examples of mentorship that junior and senior leaders can benefit from.⁶⁰

The impending courts-martial the men of the *Wager* faced after their return to England allowed Anson to demonstrate another key facet of developing an institution's future leaders: being a good steward of those future leaders.⁶¹ Anson remained invested in the fate of Cheap throughout the court-martial and conveyed to Cheap through relations that he still had Anson's support.⁶² "Faithless is he that says farewell when the road darkens" is a timeless lesson in good friendship and stewardship that Anson certainly remembered in his dealings with

the maligned and persecuted Cheap.⁶³ In some ways, being a good leader, even at the strategic level, is similar to being a good friend—never forgetting the subordinates you have left behind as you change duty positions and ensuring you have set them up for success.⁶⁴

Strategic leaders think of the big picture, understand where they fit in the sociopolitical structure, and help develop the next generation, who will pick up the mantle when those leaders inevitably leave the organization.⁶⁵ *The Wager* teaches the reader powerful lessons on how to take your leadership abilities to the next organizational level, and for that reason, among many, it is a must read.

Conclusion

The leadership lessons captured by David Grann in the pages of *The Wager* give real-life examples of the application of ADP 6-22 in real combat and survival settings.⁶⁶ Our modern Army leaders need to broaden their bookshelves to include such legendary figures as Adm. George Anson, Duke John Churchill of Marlborough, Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte, or any other of the great movers and shakers in the historical record. A good officer and leader should never limit themselves to only the experience of their living and near-living peers. "Tradition is the democracy of the dead," and a leader wholly cut off from the experiences of their forebears will miss out on incredibly valuable insights.⁶⁷ Grann, without realizing it, has given U.S. Army leaders a golden arrow in their quiver. When you look past the distance in time between the U.S. Army in 2024 and the Royal Navy in the 1740s, *The Wager* provides a tour de force in leadership for the modern Army officer and is a powerful tool for any JA in the field. *The Wager* has my unabashed recommendation. ■

Notes

Epigraph. David Grann, *The Wager: A Tale of Shipwreck, Mutiny and Murder* (New York: Doubleday, 2023), 32.

1. Ibid.

2. Ibid., 12.

3. Ibid., 13–14.

4. Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 6-22, *Army Leadership and the Profession* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Publishing Office, 31 July 2019).

5. Ibid., i–ii.

6. Ibid., para. 2-2, para. 2-4; Grann, *The Wager*, 4–257.

7. Grann, *The Wager*, 41, 46.

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid.

10. ADP 6-22, *Army Leadership and the Profession*, para. 2-9.

11. Grann, *The Wager*, 21–23.

12. Ibid., 45–46, 150–60. Warrant Officer John Bulkeley's ultimate commandeering of Captain Cheap's command after the crew's long residence on Wager Island demonstrates the effectiveness of his leadership style.

13. Ibid.

14. Ibid.
15. Ibid., 41.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid., 41, 45–46, 227. It may then come as no surprise to the reader that Campbell ultimately defected to Spain, abandoning the men he never really had a true connection with.
19. ADP 6-22, *Army Leadership and the Profession*, para. 2-1, para. 2-2.
20. Ibid., para. 2-17, para. 2-23.
21. Ibid., para. 3-1, para. 3-2.
22. "Extract of a Letter from on Board His Majesty's Ship Prince, at Sea October 26, 1805," *Times* (London), 26 December 1805, 3; "The Death of Nelson," Royal Museums Greenwich, accessed 1 April 2024, <https://www.rmg.co.uk/stories/topics/what-were-nelsons-last-words>. The discrepancy in dates between Horatio Nelson's death on 21 October and the arrival in London of the news on the 26th was likely due to the delay in the arrival of the despatches from the front.
23. Grann, *The Wager*, 37–38. In the Royal Navy a midshipman was considered an officer in training.
24. ADP 6-22, *Army Leadership and the Profession*, para. 3-2.
25. Ibid., para. 3-1.
26. Ibid., para. 4-1.
27. For example, see Grann, *The Wager*, 110.
28. Ibid., 34.
29. See, for example, Judge Advocate Legal Services (JALS) Publication 1-1, *Personnel Policies* (Washington, DC: Office of the Judge Advocate General, February 2022), 7-1.
30. Grann, *The Wager*, 150, 192. Both Bulkeley and Cheap, through Byron's knowledge or Sir John Narborough's chronicle, charted a southern and northern escape route out of Wager Island, respectively.
31. Ibid., 101.
32. ADP 6-22, *Army Leadership and the Profession*, para. 2-1.
33. Ibid., para. 5-1.
34. Ibid.
35. Grann, *The Wager*, 110.
36. Ibid., 141, 153; ADP 6-22, *Army Leadership and the Profession*, para. 5-48, para. 5-49.
37. Grann, *The Wager*, 47, 155.
38. Ibid., 141, 153; ADP 6-22, *Army Leadership and the Profession*, para. 5-48, para. 5-49.
39. ADP 6-22, *Army Leadership and the Profession*, para. 5-50–5-51.
40. Ibid.
41. Grann, *The Wager*, 10.
42. Ibid., 58.
43. Ibid., 211.
44. Ibid.
45. Stuart N. Risch, "Court Is Assembled: I'll Meet You on the High Ground," *Army Lawyer*, no. 3 (2022): 2.
46. See text accompanying notes 41–54.
47. See, for example, JALS Publication 1-1, *Personnel Policies*, para. 3-4. The current JA Leadership Development Model demonstrates the transition of leadership phases between the different ranks JAs may attain with colonels being identified for strategic leadership.
48. Grann, *The Wager*, 218–21.
49. ADP 6-22, *Army Leadership and the Profession*, para. 10-1, para. 10-3.
50. Ibid., 10-4; Grann, *The Wager*, 10, 13; see, for example, JALS Publication 1-1, *Personnel Policies*, 3.
51. Grann, *The Wager*, 210.
52. Ibid.
53. Ibid., 242. While Anson's war booty amounted to about £400,000, the war itself cost the British government over £43 million (in contemporary value). Further, Adm. Edward Vernon's failed assault on Cartagena cost the Royal Navy over ten thousand men.
54. ADP 6-22, *Army Leadership and the Profession*, para. 10-7.
55. Grann, *The Wager*, 220–21.
56. ADP 6-22, *Army Leadership and the Profession*, para. 10-45.
57. Ibid., para. 10-30.
58. See, for example, JALS Publication 1-1, *Personnel Policies*, 24, 52–54.
59. ADP 6-22, *Army Leadership and the Profession*, para. 10-30.
60. Grann, *The Wager*, 238. David Cheap, Charles Saunders, Augustus Keppel, Richard Howe, and even John Byron to name a few.
61. Ibid., 220–21.
62. Ibid.
63. J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 3 vols. (1954; repr., Boston: Mariner Books, 2005), 283; Grann, *The Wager*, 220–21.
64. ADP 6-22, *Army Leadership and the Profession*, para. 10-39.
65. Ibid., para. 10-1–10-15.
66. Grann, *The Wager*, 43–44.
67. G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (n.p.: SnowBall Classics, 2015), 29–30.

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