Dr. Anna Maria Brudenell

Lessons in Leadership: THE BATTLE OF BALAKLAVA, 1854

Dr. Anna Maria Brudenell

THE CHARGE OF THE LIGHT BRIGADE took place on 25 October 1854, during the Battle of Balaklava in the Crimean War. The action has become a byword for stubborn heroism, devotion to duty, and steadfastness in the face of overwhelming odds—but also futility, waste, incompetence, and poor communication. We will examine the battle, the charge, and the behaviour of senior commanders as a study in leadership, using the criteria of “Eight Points of Good Leadership” from the Defence Leadership Management Centre based at the Defence Academy of the United Kingdom at Shrivenham. Those points are—

1. Inspire confidence.
2. Motivate others to follow.
3. Raise the goals of others (at personal risk).
4. Build a team.
5. Provide a personal example of physical/or moral bravery, or both.
6. Achieve the task.
7. Instill and maintain discipline.
8. Delegate authority.

If the horses, colourful uniforms, swords, and lances of the Light Brigade seem far removed, it is worth remembering that the Crimean War marks the boundary between Napoleonic and modern warfare. The Crimean War saw the first use of military telecommunications, percussion rifles, railroads, and war correspondents. It was expeditionary warfare mounted by what might be termed, with only the slightest hint of irony, a “coalition of the willing.”

Background

In September 1854, a force of 51,000 British, French, and Turkish infantry, 1,000 British cavalry, and 128 guns came ashore at Calamita Bay, 30 miles north of Sevastopol in the Crimean Peninsula. The operation was a response by the great imperial powers, Britain and France, to a change in the balance
of power in the region. Russia, seeking to expand its empire, had used the Orthodox religion of Ottoman subjects in the Balkans as a pretext to install a protectorate over them. After failed attempts at diplomacy, Russia and Turkey went to war, with the Russian Navy inflicting a serious defeat on a Turkish flotilla at Sinope (November 1853), raising the possibility that Russia would overrun the declining Ottoman Empire and gain unchallenged access through the Bosphorus and Dardanelles into the Mediterranean Sea. The prospect of the Russian Black Sea fleet sailing into the Mediterranean and disrupting their global trade routes was sufficiently alarming for Britain and France to set aside their ongoing enmity and support another former enemy, the Ottoman Turks.

Following the joint British and French declaration of war on Russia (28 March 1854), an allied expeditionary force landed at Varna to oppose the Russians in the Balkans. The Russians withdrew, and in September 1854 the allied force embarked for the Crimea. The allies’ aim was to deliver “a blow that would cripple Russian naval power . . . for a generation.” Hence, they would lay siege to (and in due course capture) the Russian naval base at Sevastopol.

Leaders

Overall command of the allied force rested jointly with the British commander-in-chief, Field Marshal Lord Raglan, and the French commander-in-chief, General François Canrobert. Prince Aleksandr Menshikov led the Russian Army, with General Pavel Liprandi as his second in command. The British cavalry division, the focus of this article, consisted of two units, the Heavy Brigade and the Light Brigade. The divisional commander was Lieutenant General George Bingham, the Earl of Lucan. Lucan’s Heavy Brigade was commanded by Brigadier General Sir James Scarlett, while the Light Brigade was commanded by Lucan’s brother-in-law, Major General James Brudenell, the Earl of Cardigan. Cardigan and Lucan loathed each other, and their mutual hatred was common knowledge. They were not generally on speaking terms. This bar to effective communication would later prevent Raglan’s intentions for the Light Brigade from being conveyed accurately through Lucan to Cardigan and the Light Brigade.

All the key British leaders were from the same social group: wealthy aristocrats, they were born to lead, ferociously proud, tough, and brave. Their job was to lead their men from the front. The men would follow their officers into the very jaws of hell, unquestioningly, out of discipline and loyalty to their regiment and their leaders.

The Battle of Balaklava

The Battle of Balaklava was a Russian attempt to break the siege of Sevastopol. The battlefield consists of two valleys divided by low hills. The south valley is almost four miles in length and one mile wide. It is bordered by the Causeway Heights (300 feet high), along which runs the Vorontsov Road. The north valley runs from the Sapouné Ridge in the west to the River Chernaya in the east. It is 4.5 miles long and 1.5 miles wide. Lord Raglan and his staff were on the Sapouné Ridge with a good view of both valleys. From his vantage point, the two valleys looked like one broad plain made up of shallow valleys with low hills bordering either side. The Causeway Heights would have seemed to blend into the higher range of hills at the eastern end of the “plain.” The Fedioukine Hills on the left and Causeway Heights on the right appeared to rise so gradually that they would not have seemed to be hills. Straight ahead of Raglan, at a distance of about 4.5 miles, was a distinctive round-topped hill about 700 feet above sea level. Raglan was able to view the panorama of the battlefield, but he was unaware that this hill hampered the cavalry’s view on the valley floor.
At 0500 on 25 October, General Liprandi crossed the River Chernaya with about 25,000 men and proceeded to attack Nos. 1, 2, 3, and 4 redoubts on the Causeway Heights, held by Turkish troops. Lucan saw the attacks and sent an aide de camp (ADC) to inform Raglan. The Russians quickly “took the forts with seven guns, occupied by the Turks, who instantly ran away.” The enemy then broke through into the south valley to within striking distance of the British garrison at Balaklava.

Raglan reached the escarpment of the Sapouné Ridge at 0730 and sent instructions via his ADC, Captain Ewart, to the commander of the 4th Division, Lieutenant General Sir George Cathcart, telling him to move his division immediately to the assistance of the Turks. Cathcart, however, refused to do so, insisting that “the greater portion of my men have only [just] come from the trenches” where they were bivouacked. Cathcart declined to act even after being told that the Turks were leaving “in full flight.” It took Captain Ewart three attempts before he succeeded in getting the general to move. Cathcart clearly felt that his men were in no fit state to face the enemy; nevertheless, this is a blatant example of an officer disobeying his superior’s orders.

Raglan then ordered Lucan to move to support the Turks: “Cavalry to take ground to the left of the second line of redoubts occupied by Turks.” The cavalry was placed just beneath the unfinished no. 6 redoubt. Cossacks were then seen swarming over the Causeway Heights into the south valley. As soon as the Cossacks saw Cardigan’s 13th Light Dragoons draw swords, they were intimidated and retreated back over the Heights. Raglan then issued his second order to Lucan: “Eight squadrons of Heavy Dragoons to be detached towards Balaklava to support the Turks who are wavering.”

The Russian cavalry advanced again into the south valley and divided into two groups. Their advance was halted and turned back by two extraordinary actions.

**The Thin Red Line.** Seeing that his infantrymen were all that stood between a large force of Russian cavalry and the British base at Balaklava, Major General Sir Colin Campbell, commanding the British 93d (Highland) Regiment, formed his men into a long line of two ranks, later immortalised as the “Thin Red Line,” to block the Russian advance. Two hundred years of experience dictated that the only way infantry in the open could resist cavalry was to form a defensive square, but Campbell shouted, “Ninety Third! There’s no retreat from here! Ye must stand!” His leadership and the Highlanders’ esprit de corps ensured that the 93d stood their ground.

This should have been the first of the day’s heroic defeats. However, emboldened by their commander and armed with new rifled percussion muskets, the ’53 Pattern Enfield, the Highlanders were able to place two aimed volleys into the charging Russian cavalry, stopping them dead in their tracks. In short, Campbell’s leadership, combined with a significant advance in military technology, turned what should have been a debacle into a stirring victory.

**The charge of the Heavy Brigade.** The second column of Russian cavalry, under General Ryzhov, was driven back by Brigadier General Scarlett’s Heavy Brigade. Ignoring conventional wisdom, the
Heavy Brigade charged uphill against the oncoming Russians, who not only had the advantage of the slope, but also outflanked the British cavalry. This time, the first seven points of leadership were combined with the element of tactical surprise, as Scarlett’s attack was what the Russians least expected. The Russian cavalry were shocked and surprised: they broke and fled back towards the north valley. As a result, the charge of the Heavy Brigade succeeded in boosting the reputation of the British cavalry in Russian eyes.

While the Heavy Brigade was engaging the enemy in the south valley, the Light Brigade was at the western end of the north valley. Fleeing the Heavies, the Russian cavalry recrossed the Causeway Heights into the north valley and thereby gave the Light Brigade an opportunity to attack them. However, Cardigan failed to take the initiative, even though one of his subordinates, Captain Morris of the 17th Lancers, urged him to. What Morris did not know was that Cardigan had been “ordered into a particular position by the Lieutenant-General [Lucan], with orders on no account to leave it, and to defend it against any attack of the Russians.” This is an obvious example of abiding by orders even though it might have seemed wiser not to do so. Interestingly, Lucan later gave a different version of his order: “Well, you remember that you are placed here by Raglan himself for the defence of this position. My instructions to you are to attack anything and everything that shall come within reach of you, but you will be careful of columns or squares of infantry.” This is not the place to discuss which man, Cardigan or Lucan, was telling the truth, but it is quite clear that Lucan had failed to delegate effectively, to build a team, or to instill discipline in his unruly subordinate, and therefore failed to achieve the task.

The Charge of the Light Brigade

By 0930, the British had stabilized the potentially disastrous situation caused by the collapse of the Turkish troops on the Causeway Heights, but they had missed an opportunity to inflict a heavy blow on the Russians as they withdrew. Campbell and Scarlett had demonstrated leadership in extremis, taking risks which, due to the quality of their troops and equipment, paid off. Cathcart and Cardigan, however, had been overcautious and lacking in offensive spirit. In Cathcart’s case, this resulted in the loss of the Turkish redoubts, in Cardigan’s, a missed opportunity to reinforce the successes of the 93d and the Heavy Brigade by striking the Russian cavalry as it withdrew.

Hence, the south valley was held by Scarlett’s Heavy Brigade, on the ridge near redoubt no. 4, and the north valley by Cardigan’s Light Brigade. A horseman in the north valley, however, could not see what was happening in the south valley. This fact is of crucial importance. Raglan, looking down from the Sapouné Ridge, should not only have been aware of this, but should have taken it into consideration when issuing subsequent orders. To his front Raglan could see the Russian cavalry re-forming at the far end of the north valley behind a battery of eight guns. Raglan’s original aim had been to use infantry to block the route to the depot at Balaklava and keep the cavalry safe. The Light Brigade was below him, underneath the escarpment close to redoubt no. 6. Raglan wished to advance Cathcart’s 4th Infantry Division along the line of the Causeway Heights, retaking the Turkish redoubts from the east. The second front was to be the Duke of Cambridge’s 1st Division, which would cross the south valley and support the 4th Division. However, by 1015 the 4th Division had still not reached the

**The Battle of Balaklava**

25 October 1854
The charge of the Light Brigade

© The Marquess of Anglesey
Heights and was therefore unable to prevent the Russians from removing the Turkish guns.

Lord Raglan then issued his Third Order to Lucan, which stated, “Cavalry to advance and take advantage of any opportunity to recover the Heights. They will be supported by infantry which have been ordered. [to?] Advance on two fronts.” Raglan’s order was imprecise and did not clarify whether the cavalry or infantry were to advance on two fronts. What ensued is a good example of the confusion that can arise from imprecise orders. As orders were delivered by a “galloper,” a mounted officer, it was usual for additional explanation to be delivered verbally. Nevertheless, it is quite plain that from the outset, Raglan was unable to place himself in his subordinates’ positions, neither geographically, in terms of what they could or could not see of the battlefield, nor tactically, in terms of understanding his intent. It is possible that Lucan thought he was to wait for the infantry and that there would then be a combined advance to retake the redoubts. If so, Lucan was wrong. However, his misunderstanding was reasonable given the imprecise wording of the order, Raglan’s earlier restraint in using the cavalry, and the fact that it was against military doctrine to launch cavalry without support against fixed positions of infantry and artillery—retaking and holding defensive positions was the job of the infantry.

From Cardigan’s position at the western end of the north valley, he could see that both hills on either side were covered with Russian riflemen and artillery. He consequently sent a message to Lucan informing him of this fact. From Raglan’s perspective, the Russians could be seen preparing to remove the captured Turkish guns from the redoubts on top of the Causeway Heights. As the loss of field guns was considered a humiliation in the 19th century, it could not be allowed to go unchallenged. With the infantry nowhere to be seen, the only troops available were the cavalymen of the Light Brigade. On Raglan’s direction, General Airey wrote the infamous Fourth Order to Lucan: “Lord Raglan wishes the cavalry to advance rapidly to the front, follow the enemy and try to prevent the enemy carrying away the guns. Troop Horse Artillery may accompany. French cavalry is on your left. R. Airey. Immediate.” The Fourth Order is another example of Raglan’s badly worded orders, and its interpretation has been the subject of intense debate. Airey’s ADC, Captain Lewis Nolan of the 15th Hussars, was to deliver the message. As the C-in-C’s messenger, he was expected to understand the message and be able to explain its contents. It is probable that Nolan was fully briefed on the exact meaning of the order, or at least was confident that he understood its intent. This was a moment for decisive action, if the humiliation of losing the guns were to be avoided, and it is likely Nolan was highly excited and impatient to deliver the message. Indeed, just as he was about to set off, he was overheard by Brigadier-General Hugh Rose shouting “I’ll lead them myself, I’ll lead them out.” Raglan called after him: “Tell Lord Lucan the cavalry is to attack immediately.” Nolan held strong opinions about the correct use of cavalry and had, to the horror of other officers, published books on the subject. Nolan galloped down the escarpment and delivered Raglan’s order to Lucan. The text made no sense to
Lucan as the Russian attempts to remove the guns from the captured redoubts could not be seen from the valley floor. Raglan and his staff failed to grasp that their perspective from the top of the Sapouné Ridge was not the same as that of Lucan and Cardigan in the valley below. In addition, Raglan’s order raised a number of questions. Which front, indeed whose front, was Lucan meant to advance to so immediately? What about the infantry he had been told to wait for in the Third Order? That order had mentioned two fronts but from where he stood his view was mostly blocked by redoubt no. 4.

Unlike Raglan, Lucan could not see the Russians attempting to remove the Turkish artillery from the redoubts on the Causeway Heights. He could only see guns on the Fedioukine Hills and in the north valley. However, the captured guns in the redoubts had been firing at his troops all morning, so Lucan was certainly aware of their existence, even though he was unaware of the Russians removing them. The order had stated, “Troop horse artillery may accompany.” What was meant by “may”? Was it that Lucan could use them if he wished? Was it that Raglan was not certain whether or not the horse artillery would accompany. “French cavalry is on your left.” What was the significance of that part of the order? Had they been told to accompany Lucan’s forces? Was Lucan expected to ride over half a mile to the French cavalry and check for himself? Finally, there was the word “immediate.” If Lucan were to ride over to the French, it would take time and “immediate” obviously ruled out that possibility.

On receiving Raglan’s order, Lucan began “to urge the uselessness of such an attack and the dangers attending it.” The only enemy guns which he could see were those on the Fedioukine Hills and in the north valley. Lucan asked Nolan, “Attack, sir! Attack what? What guns?” Where are we to advance to?" Nolan, with his arms outstretched towards the Russian cavalry position behind its guns at the far end of the north valley, replied “There are the enemy, and there are the guns!”

It can be argued that Lucan, as the commanding officer of the cavalry, should have interrogated Nolan and ascertained Raglan’s intent. The fact that he failed to do so resulted in a considerable amount of blame for the outcome of the subsequent action being apportioned to him. It is possible that Lucan thought there might be some overriding reason why Raglan wanted him to send the Light Brigade down the north valley, since he knew that Raglan, being on an elevated position, had a better view of the battlefield than he did.

However, it is probable that Lucan did indeed know what he was meant to attack. This is suggested by the fact that two days later he stated in a report to Lord Raglan, “The Division took up a position with a view of supporting an attack upon the Heights when being instructed to make a rapid advance to the front to prevent the enemy carrying away the guns lost by the Turkish troops in the morning. I ordered the Light Brigade to advance in two lines, and supported them with the Heavy Brigade.” This suggests that Lucan was aware of which guns he should retrieve, namely those on the Causeway Heights. This being so, why did he order the Light Brigade to charge down the north valley?

Lord Cardigan later wrote, “The Light Cavalry Brigade was suddenly ordered to mount; and Lord Lucan then came to our front and ordered me to attack the Russians in the valley—I replied, ‘Certainly Sir but allow me to point out to you that the Russians have a Battery in the Valley in our front and Batteries and Riflemen on each flank’—Lord Lucan said ‘I cannot help that, it is Lord Raglan’s positive order that the Light Brigade attacks immediately.’ . . . We advanced directly upon and in face of the Battery which directed a murderous fire on the whole Brigade advancing.” So why did Nolan not correct anybody when it became clear that the wrong guns were about to be charged? After all, he was within earshot of Cardigan when the latter received his orders. Was this because the excitable Nolan wished “to lead the charge out,” as he had admitted within earshot of Brigadier-General Rose?

As the Light Brigade, consisting of 5 regiments amounting to 673 lancers, hussars and light dragoons, advanced down the valley towards the Russian guns, Captain Nolan must have realized, finally, that the attack was about to go awry. He veered off toward the Causeway Heights on the right, shouting and gesticulating wildly in an attempt to wheel the brigade toward the redoubts. It seems as though he was trying to tell Cardigan and the rest of the Light Brigade that they were charging in the wrong direction. Before he could make himself understood, however, he was killed by a fragment of shrapnel.
Once again British troops ignored the military doctrine of the day, this time charging an artillery position about a mile down the valley while exposed to fire from both flanks throughout. Despite the lethal fire, Cardigan “managed to keep the line and a regulated charging pace until they were within 80 yards of the Russian guns at the far end of the valley. These guns then fired simultaneously, filling the air with thick smoke and flying metal.”

A gun was fired close to Ronald, Lord Cardigan’s horse; however, Cardigan “managed to keep the pace till he came near a strong force of Russian cavalry.” He was then attacked by two Cossacks on the instructions of Prince Radzivill, who wanted Cardigan taken prisoner. Cardigan “kept his sword at the slope” and did not attempt to defend himself, as he felt it was no part of a major general’s duty to fight private soldiers. He also refused to surrender, and though he was slightly wounded in the hip, satisfied himself “that there was nothing he could usefully do without first following the Light Brigade’s retreat back up the valley.”

Lucan, meanwhile, on entering the mouth of the north valley, just in front of the Heavy Brigade, and seeing the massacre of the Light Brigade, turned to Lord William Paulet and said, “They have sacrificed the Light Brigade, they shall not have the Heavy if I can help it.” Lucan subsequently withdrew the Heavies to a position out of range of the Russians of Russians, Paget called “Halt boys! Halt front, if you don’t halt front my boys, we are done.” The two remaining regiments of the Light Brigade, now numbering less than 40 men, stood facing the enemy. The Russians then attacked them in the rear and cut off their retreat. “You must go about and do the best you can,” cried Paget to his men. The cavalrymen could not carry off the Russian guns, and without infantry support could only withdraw back up the valley under the same murderous flanking fire. In 20 minutes the Light Brigade had lost 247 men and 497 horses, and effectively ceased to exist as a fighting formation.

Guns still fired at the remnants of the Light Brigade, but thankfully only from the Causeway Heights. This was because the French 4th Chasseurs d’Afrique successfully attacked the Russian battery on the Fedoukine Hills in what turned out to be yet another uphill charge. In addition, “a party of the Chasseurs d’Afrique showed themselves menacingly [which] had the desired effect of turning the Cossacks from the purpose” of launching attacks on the retreating Light Brigade.

Lucan later blamed Lucan for the charge, claiming that “had not the Chasseurs d’Afrique at this time silenced one of these batteries, it is my opinion that the Heavy Cavalry would have been destroyed.”

Raglan later blamed Lucan for the charge, claiming that “from some misconception of the order to advance, the Lieutenant-General [Lucan] considered
that he was bound to attack at all hazards, and he accordingly ordered Major-General the Earl of Cardigan to move forward with the Light Brigade." Lord Raglan blamed Cardigan and the dead Captain Nolan, the deliverer of the order. His unwillingness to bear any responsibility for the loss of half his command and his attempt to blame a junior officer does not reflect well on Lucan, either as an individual or as a leader. Indeed, none of the people involved in initiating the charge appear to have acted well. Raglan’s order was imprecise; the drafting of the order was ambiguous (the fault of Brigadier-General Airey); Nolan failed to explain the order clearly to Lucan; Lucan failed to question Nolan in order to establish Raglan’s real intention; and Cardigan failed to seek adequate clarification from Lucan.

It is interesting to consider what might have happened in the absence of so many leadership failures: had Cathcart not demurred about sending the infantry; had Raglan not minded losing a few Turkish cannon or if he had issued clear and precise orders; had the volatile Nolan not been tasked with delivering the order; had Lucan paused to reflect rationally; or if both Cardigan and Lucan had not hated each other so passionately. It is surely no coincidence that the series of leadership failures at Balaklava led directly to one of the more significant tactical failures ever suffered by the British Army. All eight of the “points of good leadership” were violated sometime during the battle—generally with tragic results. The Crimean War can be seen as the beginning of the end of the era of the “gentleman amateur” in the British Army. In its aftermath, a series of reforms was put in place. However, the human failings displayed that morning in the environs of the Sapouné Hills still serve as a useful example: an example of how not to do things, and the potential cost of leadership failures. MR

NOTES

9. Lord Raglan had only one arm, having lost the other at Waterloo, and hence could not write while mounted.
10. Anglesey, 83-83.
11. Nolan was known to be of a highly volatile nature.
13. Ibid.
14. What we would now consider to be “professionalism” was a somewhat alien concept to the officers of the time. Officers’ motivation was more concerned with the immediate military virtues such as honour, duty, and courage.
16. Ibid.
17. 3rd Earl of Lucan, dispatch to Lord Raglan dated 27 October 1854, cited in Adkin, 135.
20. Ibid.
23. The Marquess of Anglesey, 94.
24. In fact, the Heavy Brigade suffered more casualties during the Charge of the Light Brigade than they had in their own charge earlier that morning.
27. Lord Raglan, draft dispatch, 28 October 1854, cited in Joan Wake, 410.

ANNOUNCING the 2008 General William E. DePuy Combined Arms Center Writing Competition

“Actions Required to Attain Overall Objectives in the Aftermath of Combat Operations”

★ Contest closes 2 June 2008 ★

1st Place $1,000 and featured publication in Military Review
2nd Place $750 and publication in Military Review
3rd Place $500 and publication in Military Review
4th Place $250 and special consideration for publication in Military Review

Honorable Mentions $100 and possible publication in Military Review

Submissions should be original, well-researched essays, 3,500-5,000 words long For complete information and topic suggestions, visit Military Review’s website at http://militaryreview.army.mil