Reflections on Military Professionalism

It is with trepidation that I deliver the 2014 Harmon Lecture. To be chosen for this task is a great honor, of course. But it also represents a considerable responsibility.

The first Harmon Lecture that I can recall reading was the one delivered back in 1970 by General Sir John Winthrop Hackett. Hackett, something of a soldier-scholar, had recently retired after a very successful career in the British army. He chose to call his presentation "The Military in the Service of the State." His subject was the profession of arms.

The American profession of arms was, at that very moment, in deep trouble. The Vietnam War, its American phase having begun in earnest during my plebe year in 1965, was still ongoing and obviously not going well.

The war had divided the country, members of my own generation not least of all. In 1968, the Tet Offensive had shattered expectations of anything approximating a victorious outcome.

The My Lai massacre, news of which broke the following year, left an indelible stain on the reputation of U. S. forces. A failed cover-up engineered by senior officers only made matters worse.

To top things off, an American-led invasion of Cambodia in the spring of 1970, not long before Hackett visited this institution, triggered a fresh bout of angry protest at home. This culminated with the shooting of college students by National Guardsmen at Kent State University.

It was not a happy time to be a soldier. As I boarded a plane en route to Cam Ranh Bay that summer, I knew one thing for sure – whatever we were doing in Vietnam, victory was no longer the aim.

What I did not know, but soon discovered, was that the army in which I was serving teetered on the brink of disintegration.

Astonishingly, in his presentation to the cadet wing, Hackett ignored Vietnam. He did not mention the professional crisis even then enveloping the American officer corps, affecting my own service above all.

Perhaps he was being polite. Perhaps Hackett may have been saying things that he himself believed. In any case, he served up blather dressed up as profound truths.

"Military institutions," Hackett announced, "form a repository of moral resource which should always be a source of strength within the state."

By adhering to virtues that defined the military professional ethic – he mentioned in particular "fortitude, integrity, self-restraint" along with "the surrender of the advantage of the individual to a common good" – soldiers served as moral beacons for society as a whole.

The military profession, Hackett continued, thereby provided "a well from which to draw refreshment for a body politic in need of it."

As a young officer, serving in a time of considerable moral confusion, I may have found consolation in this description. Today I find it too pat and too self-congratulatory.

Hackett pandered to his listeners. He told them what they wanted to hear rather than what they needed to hear. As a consequence, he did them a great disservice.

What Hackett might have said is this: Adherence to the military professional ethic is hard. To reduce that ethic to a laundry list of clichés is to conceal just how hard it is.

Making it harder still is the fact that the inculcation of professional values occurs in an environment that may actually undermine those values.

Let me take my own undergraduate institution as an example. The motto of the military academy – in many respects, the motto of the officer corps as a whole -- is "Duty, Honor, Country."

I think it's fair to say that the West Point that I attended back in the 1960s drilled that phrase into us. Here, reduced to a mere three words, was the code that was to define our behavior.

Yet even while insisting that cadets embrace that code, West Point was simultaneously promoting a different set of values, which fostered a different conception of what it means to be a military professional.

In this alternative conception, professionalism is about ascending the rungs of a ladder. The higher you ascend the greater your claim to professional standing. So rank, badges, awards, and prestigious assignments – these become the hallmarks of status.

Those responsible for designing the intensive socialization process that defined the West Point experience in my day would reject the charge that they were promoting values at odds with Duty, Honor, and Country. But they were, even if unconsciously or out of ignorance.

At West Point, rhetoric and everyday lived experience were not in harmony, a condition that cannot help but induce bewilderment, if not cynicism.

Furthermore, when we completed our apprenticeship at West Point and received our commissions, we discovered that this other value set – the one that placed a premium on individual recognition and advancement -- pervaded the officer corps. In Vietnam, it was reaching epidemic proportions.

In this environment, keeping faith with the code defined by Duty, Honor, and Country posed no small challenge.

I will not stand here and tell you that I myself met that challenge satisfactorily. I did not. Perhaps paradoxically, my personal failings eventually led me to appreciate just how demanding the military professional ethic is. For me, falling short of the standard became a belated source of corrective education.

That was many years ago, of course. I have long since left your profession. I am today merely an interested, although I hope, sympathetic observer.

As such, I am troubled by the evidence that another crisis of sorts is afflicting the profession of arms.

I do not think for a second that the crisis compares even remotely to the crisis provoked by Vietnam. But it is a crisis all the same, one that has in recent months caught the attention of both Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel and General Martin Dempsey, current chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

I will not rehearse the evidence of this current crisis in detail, but it is everywhere. It ranges from stupefying misconduct by senior officers to cheating scandals – cheating conspiracies really -- involving younger officers charged with responsibility for the nation's land-based nuclear strike forces.

It also includes reprehensible actions by service academy cadets and midshipman manifestly clueless about what it means to behave in a manner becoming an "an officer and a gentleman." I ask your forgiveness for using that gendered yet still evocative phrase.

What troubles me more still is my suspicion that those inhabiting the upper reaches of the Pentagon have little conception of how to address the problem. They know something's gone awry. They are at a loss for how to fix what's broken.

I note that Secretary Hagel recently appointed a flag officer to serve as his "senior advisor on military professionalism." While bureaucratically predictable, this is the equivalent of President Obama adding to the White House staff a "senior advisor for bipartisanship."

It's a gesture – what you do to make a show of doing something, hoping thereby to conceal the fact that you actually don't know what to do.

As a practical matter, the addition of a one-star admiral to the Office of the Secretary of Defense – already consisting of the secretary, a deputy secretary, an executive secretary, five undersecretaries, six deputy undersecretaries, fifteen assistant secretaries, and five principal deputy assistant secretaries along with some 2400 other military and civilian personnel -- is unlikely to have a transformative effect.

No doubt high-sounding exhortations will rain down from on high. But when it comes to navigating through the ethical challenges you will encounter upon being commissioned, don't expect much in terms of concrete assistance.

For that kind of guidance, don't bother to look up. Instead, look within.

So where might you turn for help in anticipating those challenges? Although my own academic training is in history, I vote for literature.

Of course, we live in an age when reading has become a euphemism for submitting to the demands of the electronic devices to which we tether ourselves. Taking the time to absorb something as long as a novel may seem like a throwback from an earlier day – like holding hands at a movie show or breaking for afternoon tea.

In fact, however, the library at this institution contains an impressive body of literature that explores and reflects on what it means to be a military professional.

Much of that literature is American, the work of writers who during the wars of the twentieth century witnessed at firsthand the moral and ethical dilemmas to which military service gives rise.

What I want to do this evening is to call to your attention to one such writer and to one particular novel that might resonate with you.

The writer is James Salter. The novel is his first book *The Hunters.*

Let me tell you a little bit about Salter. He graduated from West Point in 1945. After receiving his commission, he trained as an aviator and transferred to the Air Force upon its creation in 1947.

By 1952, he was fighter pilot, flying F86s in Korea where he was credited with downing one MiG15. A few years later, he resigned his commission to become a fulltime writer, subsequently achieving considerable success.

The action in *The Hunters* takes place in Korea more or less when Salter himself served there. It's late in the war. At Panmunjom, truce talks are underway although when or even if they will produce positive results is impossible to say.

At Kimpo Air Base, not far outside of Seoul, Colonel Dutch Imil commands an F86 fighter wing. An ace during World War II and again in Korea, Imil exudes a crude, swaggering charisma.

He will stop at nothing, Salter writes, "to have a great wing, one of the glories of which would become legend." For Imil, glory is defined quantitatively. Legendary pilots down MiGs. Legendary fighter wings down lots of MiGs. That is the sole measure of merit.

For Imil, literally nothing else matters. He is supremely indifferent to the war's larger purposes.

So too are the officers under his command. They are oblivious to any connection between the air war they are waging high above the Yalu and the ground combat ongoing across the mid-section of the Korean peninsula below.

At Kimpo, they inhabit their own hermetically sealed world – a common aspect of military life where the outfit to which you belong defines the limits of the universe.

As the novel opens, Captain Cleve Connell arrives at Kimpo to join Imil's outfit. Connell brings with him a reputation for being a hot pilot, at least in peacetime. He and his new commander have a history.

Connell had served under Imil in Panama after World War II. So Imil welcomes the new arrival with considerable enthusiasm, certain that Cleve will add to the wing's tally of kills.

At thirty-one, Cleve knows that his flying days are numbered. He is, according to Salter, "not too old." Yet his vision isn't as sharp as it once was. As a pilot, he has passed his prime. Still, he is eager to test himself in combat.

In Korea, Salter writes, Cleve expects to "make a valedictory befitting his years." By becoming an ace, he will achieve a form of immortality. He will, he reflects, "attain himself."

As far as Imil is concerned, all it takes to become an ace is guts and skill. Those who want a fight find a fight. Those who press the fight get kills, although sometimes a bit of creative bookkeeping helps.

So at least Salter suggests when he describes Imil browbeating a young lieutenant into confirming another pilot's claim of having scored a victory. The very junior officer tells his overbearing commander that he can't verify the claim.

"Try to remember, Dawes," Imil urges. "Think. Think of your career."

Thus prompted, Dawes duly remembers. "As a matter of fact," he replies, "I do seem to recall seeing that MiG smoking."

"Certainly you did."

"Yes, that's right. It was on fire. Now that I think back, I remember it. He got it, all right. There's no doubt about it."

Thanks to Dawes' sudden epiphany, the wing adds another downed MiG to its scorecard.

As Cleve soon learns, however, when it comes to aerial combat, fortune too plays a large role. This is true of all war, of course. As Clausewitz reminds us, "No other human activity is so continuously or universally bound up with chance."

In Korea, MiGs venture south from their sanctuaries in China when they choose to, not when the Americans want them to. So although Cleve flies his share missions, luck eludes him. Contacts with the enemy are few. Glory remains beyond reach.

Compounding Cleve's frustration is the far greater success enjoyed by a brash young lieutenant assigned to Cleve's own flight. Ed Pell – his preferred handle is "the Doctor" – has guts and skill *and* luck.

He also possesses a crucial fourth quality: as with Imil, his conscience does not pose much of a constraint. Pell, writes Salter, is "as free of idealism as a boy raised in the slums."

In Pell's moral universe – as in Imil's -- what matters is that an action *count,* not whether it *deserves* to be counted. You've no doubt encountered this attitude yourself.

In our own day, it has become commonplace. We see it everywhere from steroid-ingesting baseball players keen to rack up home runs to ambitious politicians keen to inflate their vote count. It's called selling your soul.

When it comes to downing MiGs, Pell easily accommodates Dutch Imil's priorities. Disregarding SOPs when they get in his way, endangering others, playing fast-and-loose with the truth, "the Doctor" scores one kill after another.

Soon enough he displaces Cleve as the wing commander's fair-haired boy. In the eyes of his fellow fighter pilots, who are simultaneously comrades and competitors, "the Doctor" achieves the status of hero, role model, and celebrity. He is, in short, what Cleve had imagined himself destined to become.

Meanwhile, Cleve himself has turned out to be something of a bust. He is the athlete who looks good in practice but can't get it done at game time.

"It was all unbelievable," Salter writes. "Cleve was completely unaccustomed to the part he was playing…. [H]e had to accept it, but it was somehow wrong, immensely so. …. He said nothing. He kept it inside, where, like a serpent, it devoured him."

It gradually dawns on Cleve that he is not going to "attain himself" in Korea. Fate is conspiring against him. He is not going to become an ace. He is not going to gain immortality.

Meanwhile, Pell, for whom he feels nothing but scorn, is doing all of those things. That in achieving the status to which Cleve himself had aspired, Pell brazenly violates basic standards of professional conduct makes his success all the more unbearable.

Nowhere in the book does Cleve consciously reflect on the normative dimensions of officership. You'll find no references to Duty, Honor, Country here. Yet Pell's cavalier behavior, to which Imil turns a blind eye or even encourages, offends him.

It also leads him to question the ambitions that he himself had entertained when he had arrived in Korea.

> He had come to acquit himself [Salter writes] but now he was not sure. He had come for a climax of victory, but in a way he did not want that now. He wanted more, to be above wanting it, to be independent of having to have it. And he knew, with utmost certainty, he would never achieve that. He was a prisoner of the war. If he did not get MiGs he would have failed, not only in his own eyes but in everyone's. ….
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> He would have seized anything that allowed him release. He dreaded the need to sacrifice himself on this pitiless altar, of fighting for something he no longer had the strength to disdain.

Impulsively, and recklessly, Cleve sets out to restore those standards, or at least to punish Pell for disregarding them.

On the day that Pell gets his fifth MiG – as luck would have it, Cleve was not on the mission – another officer in Cleve's flight is shot down. Pell was the lost officer's wingman. Scuttlebutt has it that to get his MiG, Pell had abandoned his lead, for fighter pilots a cardinal sin.

At a gathering of the wing's officers, with Pell present, Cleve confronts Imil.

"I want Pell grounded," he declares.

"What in hell are you talking about?"

"Ground him," Cleve says again. "I want to see that he doesn't fly anymore."

"A man with five victories, and you want me to ground him. What's wrong with you?"

"He killed his leader today. If he'd shot him down personally, it wouldn't have been any different."

Pell speaks up. "It wasn't my fault. He wouldn't break."

"You're a liar. You never told him to."

Imil dismisses the assembly and wheels on Cleve.

"What are you trying to do, Connell? Wreck the group?

"No, sir. I'm trying to uphold it."

Of course, what Cleve is trying to uphold – or more accurately restore – is the notion that some things matter more than getting MiGs.

Imil angrily ends the conversation. He is not about to take his cues from a mere captain – especially one who apparently lacks the stuff that makes for great fighter pilots.

In the eyes of his commander, Cleve has become persona non grata. In the eyes of the pilots who comprise Pell's following, he is a spoilsport, a loser consumed by envy.

Meanwhile, Pell – who soon registers his sixth kill – has become, in Salter's words, "the most famous pilot in the Air Force."

Fan mail pours in. Magazines clamor for interviews. Pretty girls send their pictures. Generals shower him with praise. As the killer of MiGs, he has become, so it seems, a living legend.

The end of Cleve's combat tour – and his release from purgatory -- is approaching. He has only eleven missions left to fly before going home.

Suddenly and unexpectedly, his luck changes.

A big fight is in the offing, with hundreds of MiGs reported gathering at bases just inside China. Imil orders a maximum effort – every available aircraft with every available pilot will fly.

There is a problem with Cleve's plane. The gun camera isn't working. He and his wingman, a run-of-the-mill lieutenant named Billy Hunter, take off anyway, the last two fighters off the strip.

No fight occurs. It is all a feint. Although swarms of enemy fighters launch, they do not give battle. As the lead ships in Imil's wing begin running short on fuel, they turn back south.

Cleve trails behind, now alone with his wingman. Then just before breaking station, they suddenly encounter four MiGs.

Now among enemy fighter pilots, there is one -- perhaps Chinese, perhaps Russian – who the Americans have nicknamed Casey Jones. The sight of the distinctive black stripes on Casey's MiG15 strikes fear into the stoutest hearts. Casey is the best of the best. And he is murderously ferocious.

Cleve now finds himself in a fierce dogfight with Casey himself. Here is Salter's masterful description of its conclusion:

> Casey broke left. French curves of vapor trailed from his wingtips. Cleve was behind him on the inside, turning as hard as he could. The bright pipper of his sight was creeping up on the MiG…. He squeezed the trigger. The tracers arced out, falling mostly behind. …. They were just above the trees. …. He fired again. …. Solid strikes along the fuselage. There was a burst of white flame and a sudden flood of smoke. The MiG pulled up sharply, climbing. It was slipping away from him, but as it did, he laced it with hits. Finally, trailing a curtain of fire, it rolled over on one wing and started down.

In a stroke, Cleve has outdone all the others. He has achieved the seemingly unachievable. He has redeemed himself. Now all he needs is to return get to Kimpo. There vindication waits.

Cleve radios a cryptic sitrep to home base: They'd downed one.

Unfortunately, as he and Hunter head back south, they are precariously low on fuel. They climb to 38,000 feet. A hundred miles north of Kimpo they run out of gas.

Bailing out over North Korea is not an attractive option. They will glide toward home base, slowly losing altitude with each mile. Cleve's run of good fortune holds. He reaches the runway and makes a dead stick landing.

Hunter is not so lucky. He crashes a half-mile short. The sole witness to his duel with Casey Jones is killed instantly.

Imil and a scrum of other pilots, including Pell, meet Cleve as he dismounts from his cockpit. A crew chief confirms that Cleve's gun camera has malfunctioned.

"There goes the damned confirmation," Imil complains.

"It doesn't matter," Cleve replies.

"Don't be so goddamned casual. Of course it matters.

“Not this time.”

“What are you talking about?

“It was Casey Jones.”

Coming from Cleve, this was an extraordinary claim, verging on the preposterous.

“Are you sure?” Imil asks.

“There’s no film, Colonel,” Pell shouts. “There’s no one to confirm it now.”

“No,” Imil agrees. “There’s not.”

The prize Cleve has won – the ultimate prize of having bested Casey Jones -- is slipping away. What is rightly his – what he had earned -- is about to be lost.

How should he respond? How would I? How would you?

The test Cleve faces, in its way hardly less demanding than taking on the enemy ace, requires an instantaneous response. It is a test for which slogans, platitudes, or eloquent speeches are worse than useless. Cleve has only instinct on which to draw.

So before the prize can be taken, he gives it away. He lies. In doing so, he repudiates the shabby standard that Imil upholds and that Pell has so adeptly exploited.

“Oh yes, there is,” Cleve announces.

“Who?”

“I can confirm it. Hunter got him.”

"It had come out almost unconsciously," Salter writes. "Malice had brought it, and protest, and the sweeping magnanimity that accompanies triumph."

His effort to repeal Kimpo's prevailing moral order having failed, Cleve seizes this unexpected opportunity to reassert his own conception of what duty and honor require.

Yet doing so means first renouncing all that he himself had so eagerly sought, surrendering it precisely at the moment when it lay within his grasp.

"Billy Hunter would have his day as a hero," Salter continues. "Cleve could give him that, at least…. He had kept a pledge. His heart cried out to go among them and tell them how he had fulfilled whatever promise he had, how in the clean sky he had met and conquered a legend."

Now no one would know. Ever. Except Cleve himself.

"He felt as if he had finally passed from youth into a real maturity, [Salter continues] one in which he soberly realized the price that had to be paid to abide by the ideals that were once so bright and compelling. The reckoning was dear; but for all that they had cost him, he held them even more fiercely."

Here Salter might have ended his book. But he chose to do otherwise. After all, the war did not end that day. It continued. Each day, Americans strapped themselves into their planes and flew north.

On one of his very last missions, Cleve gets into another fight. This time he loses – Is it luck? Has age caught up with him? – and is killed.

Immortality? No, none. Instead, Cleve will be forgotten, a pilot who by all accounts never quite lived up to his advanced billing. There Salter's story summarily concludes.

The reader may wonder what fate had in store for the others.

Surely the MiGs harvested by the pilots under Imil's command will earn him at least one more promotion. Yet he is probably too rough around the edges to go further. We might imagine him retiring to San Antonio or Colorado Springs, probably playing golf and drinking himself to death.

Pell is much smoother, of course. With his many talents, not least an aptitude for self-promotion and knowing how to play the game, Pell will make it much closer to the top.

Perhaps he ends up on a stage like this, making solemn pronouncements to young cadets about Duty, Honor, and Country or, in the manner of Sir John Hackett, extolling the armed services as a reservoir of rectitude and virtue.

Of course, the real life equivalents of Imil and Pell – the commanders who ran the air war in Korea and the pilots who became aces – are themselves long since forgotten. I don't expect that many of you know their names. I don't. Nor do our countrymen. Whatever glory these airmen may have won, whether deserved or stolen, has proven transitory.

Which seems to me to be Salter's point: The dreams of glory that motivated Imil and Pell, and for which Cleve hungered, amount to fool's gold. As such, such a prize is hardly worth compromising yourself to acquire.

By comparison, real gold is not easily found. As Cleve eventually discovers, it requires knowing yourself.

Never easily attained, self-knowledge becomes all the more difficult to acquire in a world where Dutch Imil's ethical elasticity too often prevails and where slick connivers like Pell get ahead.

So what did Cleve ultimately discover? What might an aspiring military professional take from a book such as this?

This, I think: What ultimately matters is not who you might become tomorrow or the day after. No, what matters is what you do today and what that says about who you are.

With that I will stop, wishing you well in your own quest for self-knowledge.

Thank you.