MAJOR GENERAL PAUL NANSON

AN OFFICER AND A GENTLEMAN

BY SAMANTHA REA

Major General Paul Nanson CBE serves as Commandant of the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst and General Officer Commanding Recruiting and Initial Training Command. With more than 30 years spent in the British Army, Nanson has served in the Troubles, the Gulf War, the Bosnian war, the Iraq war, and the war in Afghanistan. His book Stand Up Straight shares the lessons we can all learn from Sandhurst, where officers in the British Army are trained to take on the responsibility of leading their fellow soldiers. We found out more…

What inspired you to join the Army?

I wanted to join the Army from a very early age. I was brought up with a taste for it because our next-door neighbour, when I was very little, had served in WWII, and he regaled me with stories of derring-do. His sons were joining his regiment, so when they came back on leave, I chatted to them about Sandhurst and about being an officer, and it just lit a spark with me. I wanted to go to this amazing place, but I failed my selection to get in. They said go away and get a bit more confidence, so one of the things I did in that time was join the Reserves, then I went back and did regular selection 18 months or so later. I got in and the rest is history.

It seems like we could all benefit from the discipline that’s instilled in the Army. Do you think we should have National Service?

I don’t think we need to go back to National Service. I do think there are elements of military life that can be applied to the civilian world, such as self-discipline and values-based leadership, but I don’t think we should make people join the military service. For certain people it’s the right route, so it’s important to spell out the amazing opportunities the Army gives, and to try and get that word spread, so people realise it’s an option.

Do you think schools should take a leaf out of Sandhurst’s book and teach pupils about confidence and self-discipline?

I think there’s definitely a place for teaching youngsters about standards and being confident in their own skin, and particularly with schools, about being allowed to fail. Failure should not be seen as something that’s bad, necessarily. You’re there to learn, and you’ve got to learn that there will be times when you don’t make the right decision, or things go wrong for you, and bouncing back from that makes you a stronger character. There’s a place to learn these life skills in schools, but I don’t think it’s necessarily got to be in the Army way.

Some of the Army’s values, such as putting other people before yourself and helping anyone who’s in trouble, correspond with Christian values. Is there any connection?

Do the Army’s values stem from Christian values?

The values of the Army may very well come from Christianity: I couldn’t say, but we do encourage our cadets to understand the spiritual needs of their soldiers. We encourage them – we don’t order them – to go to church. We have a chapel at Sandhurst, and we have Chapel Sundays. They don’t have to go, but we encourage them. We say: ‘If you are going to lead men and women, particularly in an operational environment, you need to understand that they will have beliefs that you need to attend to.’ I absolutely recognise the
importance of religion in active service. Everybody needs something to believe in, and when times are tough, I personally look to my religion to cope. Others may not, but I think everyone needs to understand that.

You say in your book that we allow other nations to send their personnel to Sandhurst for officer training. What if we end up at war with that country? Couldn’t they use our tactics against us? And doesn’t this book give the competition the edge?

That’s not a Sandhurst decision – it’s decided through foreign policy and defence policy. We get those nations that the UK wants to deal with, so I think it would be unusual for us to go to war against any of them. If we do though, we’re not giving away any state secrets at Sandhurst, we’re just teaching British values and standards, and an example of professional British soldiering. And if the opposition gets out of bed a bit earlier because of my book, OK I’ll take that one!

There’s a massive difference between life in the Army and life as a civilian. Do you think there’s enough support in place for those leaving the Army?

The Army’s very good at transitioning you into civilian life, and I’m going through that process myself at the moment. Whether you’re an officer or a soldier, the support you get as you leave the Army is brilliant, and thereafter there are many organisations that support veterans. Could we do more? Of course we could. We know that, and people in the Army are relying on you, and the effect of being late is terrible. When people are late in the civilian world it does frustrate me, because I’ve been taught to be on time. It doesn’t mean I think any less of them, but I do think being late shows a lack of respect – unless you can’t help it, of course. I don’t want to come across as a Puritan – I have my failings the same as everyone else – but I think it’s important in terms of you as a person.

EVERYBODY NEEDS HELP AT SOME STAGE, AND NO ONE SHOULD BE AFRAID TO ASK.
In everyday life we’re often told, ‘Don’t sweat the small stuff.’ However, the message in your book seems to be that we should. Why’s that?

I take a leaf out of the book of the cycling team at Sky, where the thinking is: ‘Get the little things right, and the big things come right as well.’ I think attending to detail is important, and getting the detail right is important. For any of us who serve in the military, and particularly in the Army, where we have to synchronise and co-ordinate, and make sure everything’s accurate because lives depend on it: you do pay attention to the small stuff, because the small stuff matters.

You wrote that when we look good, we feel good. Do you think we should all make more of an effort, even when no one can see us?

If we work from home, for example, should we ditch our jogging bottoms and dress as if we’re going into an office?

I don’t think you’d put a three-piece suit on to sit at your kitchen table, but I do think if you are going out in public that making yourself look good, making sure you’re smart and that your shoes are clean, must make you feel better. It certainly creates the right impression among others. I think looking smart and presentable is a huge part of life.

A lot of us, I think men especially, put off going to the doctor. We shrug things off thinking, ‘I’ll be all right.’ However, in the book you say that even if someone has a blister, it’s immediately sorted out by the...
medic. Do you think we should all get into the habit of getting things seen to straight away?

Yes, I think men are more prone to grizzling it out and thinking: ‘I’m not going to go sick because it’s a sign of weakness.’ Particularly with mental health, because I think it has somehow become a sign of weakness to ask for help. We’re now doing mental resilience training to get across the message that everybody needs help at some stage, and no one should be afraid to ask. The earlier you ask for help, the earlier we can sort it out for you. If you’re struggling to deal with something – and some of our boys and girls see some pretty horrific things – if you need a bit of help, talk to someone, and we will sort it out. There’s nothing we can’t sort out in the Army if you let us know. And that translates into Civvy Street. One of the things I talk about in the book is, when you pack your rucksack, don’t carry unnecessary weight around – whether it’s physical or mental. Get rid of it as soon as you can by sharing it with others, talking to people, and do not be embarrassed to ask for help. It’s not a sign of weakness.

You mention in the book that in the Army people tend to open up when they’re eating together. Relating that to civilian life, I think often families don’t eat together because someone’s coming home late from work, or the kids are at after-school clubs. Do you think we should strive to eat together as a family?

Yes, I think getting together round the table, and having a meal together, with phones put away and televisions switched off, just talking, is really important. Sharing food together probably goes back to when we were cavemen. It’s a time you naturally come together and maybe you’re able to talk more freely when you’re sitting there eating a can of beans or whatever it may be. It’s nice, when you’re worried or scared, to have that ritual of sitting, just talking, with your mates. The same applies to talking to your kids. If you’re sitting around chatting you’ll probably pick up on things, and gain an understanding of what’s going on in their lives, that you might not get if they’re upstairs playing on the Xbox.

You wrote about cadets having their socks lined up and their pillowcase creases facing the door. What would you say to someone who wondered if their time might be better spent focused on things that seem more important?

An ordered environment equals an ordered mind, equals a better approach to life. The reason we make cadets do those things, that may seem trivial to an outsider, is that for us it’s an important part of making sure you have pride in your equipment and your kit, and that you have the discipline to ensure your kit is in good order. Primarily that’s because, at the end of Sandhurst, we expect you to be able to look after 32 men and women, and be able to make sure they are in good order and they’re looked after properly. So taking it back to civilian life, I’m not saying everyone needs to fold their socks, but it’s not a bad thing to make sure you live in an uncluttered house because that creates a sense of order to your life.

Is there any way a civilian can get the kind of training cadets get at Sandhurst?

British Military Fitness delivers military style fitness in all the parks in London, and I know that most of the boys and girls who work for them are ex-Army. There are other organisations out there, I’m sure, that will do a similar sort of thing to us, but if you want the real thing, you’re going to have to join the Army!