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LESSONS IN LEADERSHIP – SIR JOHN MONASH



"I don't care a damn for your loyal service when you think I am right; when I really want it most is when you think I am wrong." Lt General Sir John Monash

Sir John Monash many believe is the finest Australian soldier who achieved great distinction in war and peace. He was born in Melbourne, the eldest son of a German-Jewish couple, Louis and Bertha Monash. His parents moved to Jerilderie in New South Wales where his parents opened a general store. For three years he went to the local school, but made such an impression that his parents were persuaded to send their son to a city school where he would have greater opportunities to achieve his potential. Bertha went to Melbourne with the children and John was enrolled at Scotch College. The move was successful as John matriculated from the school at fourteen and in his final year was equal dux of the school.

He was only sixteen when he entered the University of Melbourne and there become a prodigious reader. He graduated in arts and civil engineering and began a part-time course in law. He married in 1891 and by 1895 had achieved his Bachelor of Law and was a Master of Civil Engineering. At the time the economy was performing well and Monash set up as a consulting engineer with a great future ahead. But almost immediately the boom broke and the country was plunged into a depression. He found a role with the Melbourne Harbour Trust but after three years was retrenched. He returned to private practice gradually and built his reputation and became a recognised leader in his field.

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Monash's military studies began in 1884 when he enlisted as a private in the University Company of the Fourth Battalion, Victorian Rifles. By 1887 he was appointed to the Militia Garrison Artillery with the rank of lieutenant.

With war looming in Europe, Monash was appointed in 1913 as Commander of the Thirteenth Infantry Brigade and given the task of moulding his three Battalions into a coherent force. The next year, aged forty-nine, he was appointed Commander of the Fourth Infantry Brigade and set out with his troops to Egypt and then to Gallipoli.

Monash was on the Anzac Peninsular with his Brigade throughout the action and was the only Brigade Commander not killed or evacuated through wounds or physical or physiological breakdown. After the evacuation from Gallipoli he and his troops were sent to France where he was promoted to Major General. He distinguished himself as a leader in action at Ypres and Passchendaele where some of the toughest and deadliest fighting of the First World War occurred.

In 1916, he received the news of a major German advance. His actions were decisive in stopping the advance and in May of that year Monash was promoted to the Commander of the Australian Army Corps. He felt the time had come for a new offensive strategy in the conduct of the war. To this end he forged a new combination of tank and infantry co-operation which he put to the test at the Battle of Hamel. It was an extraordinary success, the battle ended in only ninety-three minutes with every objective gained by the Australians.

King George V visited his headquarters and conferred on him the accolade of Knight Commander of the Bath, the first time in almost two centuries that a British Monarch had knighted a Commander on the field.

According to the British Prime Minister, Lloyd George "Monash was the most resourceful general in the whole of the British Army." After the armistice he accepted a post as Australia's Director-General of Repatriation and Demobilisation and established a scheme which allowed for returning troops to be trained for post-war jobs. As a result tens of thousands returned to civilian life in Australia with skills, trades and other callings. Monash was demobilised on 13 June 1920 and at fifty five resumed civilian life. He became Chairman of the Victorian State Electricity commission. So successful was his work that Victoria was able to claim the commission was the largest electric supply authority in Australia. Monash had spent his time creating the system through coal and hydro which accelerated Victoria's industrialisation and made the State largely independent of power resources outside its borders.

He died on 8 October 1931, aged sixty-six. His military career had been crowned a year earlier by his promotion to the rank of full General. He was awarded a state funeral, which had more mourners than any other funeral in Australian history with approximately three hundred thousand people attending.

Gregory Robinson, Managing Partner, "Monash's talent came on full display as he rose in the ranks where he had opportunity to use his great skills in meticulous planning and organisation and to innovate in the area of technology and tactics. His motto was 'feed your troops on victory.' Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery would write, 'I would name Sir John Monash as the best General on the Western Front in Europe.' At the Battle of Hamel, Monash had planned the battle to finish in

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ninety minutes, and astonishingly secured victory in ninety-three minutes. Monash was highly regarded for his focus on the wellbeing of his soldiers and on gaining objectives at minimal cost. He was outstanding in his ability to plan for all contingencies, and placed greater emphasis on administration, as opposed to being a warrior on the front line. He adapted his thinking in response to his mistakes. If need be he could be ruthless. Ultimately Monash's planning was exceptional and poor decisions for set piece battles were rare. His failings are well documented because they are uncommon. He abhorred war and strove to achieve his objectives at a minimal cost. His use of technology and his innovative tactics saved many lives and were instrumental in his victories. He was one of the few commanders who understood the totality of war. Under his command, the Australian effort was extraordinary. He was able to integrate new concepts, displayed the courage of his convictions, and fed his soldiers on success. He made mistakes but guided his armies to success. We can draw a number of lessons from Monash but two in particular: the need for intense planning and focusing on your people."

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