

Sir Solitude: Leadership Lessons from Lieutenant General Sir Graeme Lamb



By Jason Criss Howk

At a recent seminar with Mike Erwin (of [Team RWB](#) and [The Positivity Project](#)), he asked the audience to think about the greatest leader they had ever worked with, and to list the traits that made them effective. I did not have to hesitate a second on my choice. The attributes were easy to recall as well. I have worked for or near some of the most praised leaders in the U.S. military but I wrote down a name from the UK Army, Graeme Lamb.

If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster

And treat those two impostors just the same...

As for the attributes that I and others saw in Sir LtGen Graeme C.M. Lamb, some of them may seem unwanted but I will explain how they worked together. I listed visionary, loyal, trusted, trusting, foul-mouthed, intelligent but not over-educated, a one-off, blunt, manipulative, utterly focused, persuasive in speech, a family man, and a friend. As I sat through Mike's seminar and his focus turned to the value of solitude, I added that trait to the list of things that made Lamb successful. Sir Graeme might be the most effective user of solitude I have seen since my grandfather showed me this technique's benefits in the 1970s.

I'll start with some of the concepts of great leadership that many of you are already familiar with. When I had the opportunity to assist a retiring LtGen Lamb on a mission to help the Afghans kick-start a reintegration and peace process, I was given only a few pieces of advice from GEN McChrystal, then-COMISAF. He said, "Jason Graeme cuts to the heart of the problem and finds solutions quickly. He knows how to cut a deal." I didn't know how he did this magic, but I soon found out.

First, he was **loyal** to his mission, himself, and his team. He was completely **trusted** by Generals McChrystal and Petraeus. For the latter, he was Deputy Commander in Iraq previously. His loyalty was also why he trusted his team and they returned that trust. He recruited our 35-person Joint, Interagency, and Multinational team slowly and let his subordinates have complete control of the tasks they developed...more often than he assigned. That loyalty and trust wasn't lost on his team. They excelled in this true mission command environment. As an Army Captain, I was in awe. I had tried, like so many others, to let my teams run with just my vision and intent, but fell short many times. Sir Graeme was practiced and comfortable with the uncomfortable. He often made a point to explain

how improvisation helps actors and basketball players. He said improvisation could teach Soldiers about reacting instantly to impact producing opportunities, whether it's a goal, fast pass, or a perfectly timed joke. You can read more about his mission command theory in this *Strategy Bridge* [article](#).

If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue,

Or walk with Kings—nor lose the common touch...

Graeme was not only a visionary but also a great **communicator**. His words caused people to act, both those who worked for him, as well as those who were unaware they were working for him. He had a very long-term view of missions and life in general and used his often **profanity-laced speech** to throw people off balance and hide his superior intellect. I watched Graeme use his words to inspire, confuse, recruit, and manipulate those in his vicinity. He was very **blunt** and often spoke in a low voice causing his listeners to lean in to hear him. Combined with his Scottish accent, Graeme was an entertaining speaker. He sprinkled in quotes from great authors like Rudyard Kipling, the poet quoted throughout this article.

You likely noticed I used the word **manipulation** a few times and that may concern you as a leader. But as LtGen Lamb explained to me more than once, “at its heart, leadership is about manipulation...let’s not kid ourselves.” I never took it to mean that leaders were bad people with ill intentions; he meant that a leader must be honest about his key task—to get everyone that worked for him to do their task, no matter how unpleasant...and to maybe even relish the mission.

To be effective and achieve the most impossible of missions, Graeme was **utterly focused**. While he often seemed unconcerned on the outside and allowed the trivial swirling around

him to fall away, his mind was always on the greater task. Whether he was traveling, working out, eating, driving, or drinking a good scotch, LtGen Lamb's mind was always on task. As his military assistant and adviser, I too was never able to stop thinking about the mission. In the most unlikely of situations or locations he would bring up an issue we were working on and blurt out a solution to discuss or an idea to be communicated to our team.

If you can keep your head when all about you

Are losing theirs and blaming it on you...

You might wonder how Graeme Lamb learned all these skills and became such a respected leader; it wasn't in college. He commissioned from Sandhurst right after high school. He never attended schools except for mandatory military professional development courses. He was more of an anthropologist than an engineer in his approach to learning. Graeme watched others and read useful books, logging away useful lessons and noting other's failures. His intelligence was very high, but he never presented himself as over-educated. That common touch was very evident when I would overhear enlisted men talk about Graeme telling Chuck Norris-like stories of his exploits. His unique leadership style was legendary among the officer corps, especially in the UK Special Forces ranks. As one Special Air Services (SAS) officer explained to me, "Jason Lambo is a one-off, don't try to emulate his ways because your Army won't accept you for it." What so many officers were trying to tell me was that only someone as unique as Graeme could get away with his complete leadership technique. Those who had seen his capabilities on operational deployments to 4 continents could attest to this.

If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you,

But make allowance for their doubting too;

Solitude is the one trait, that looking back, I think steeled Sir Graeme for his controversial task and at the same time offered him clarity that many of us lacked at key times. As you can guess, he has a creative streak, but what we were asked to do in assistance to the Afghan government required a strong moral courage as well.

One of the first things that Graeme asked me to do, the evening he arrived in Kabul from London, was find a quote from Martin Luther King Jr. It was from his 1968 speech about true leadership and priorities. The words we printed out and hung on his office wall were these:

“On some positions cowardice asks the question, is it safe?

Expediency asks the question, is it politic?

Vanity asks the question, is it popular?

But conscience asks the question, is it right? And there comes a time when one must take a position that is neither safe, nor politic, nor popular but he must take it because conscience tells him it is right.”

I had never read the speech before but the words struck me as critical to our task. Graeme was challenged over the next year by generals, ambassadors, ministers, presidents, and senators to be safe, political, and popular...but he always followed his conscience toward right. He was not cowardly, expedient, or vane when many around him were. He inspired others to rise to his level.

I watched him take time to find solitude every day. It might be grabbing a coffee and sitting

in the sun outside his container for an hour. It was often closing his door and opening his office window to let the sun “warm his bones” as he called it. He also found solitude on airplane rides and while doing physical fitness. Often on long layovers at airports we would sit in silence for a bit after we had worked on a speech or a strategy. He would then come out of his trance after 30 minutes and produce the answer we had been struggling to find. Then we would grab an ice cream or Five-Guys burger.

Solitude, if correctly utilized, can give you the insights that others cannot find. I watched LtGen Graeme emerge from periods of solitude with feasible, actionable solutions for the year that I worked for him and it seemed miraculous. It was like nothing I had ever seen in numerous other senior leaders across the U.S. Government.

And lose, and start again at your beginnings

And never breathe a word about your loss;

Finally, I want to relate how solitude gave Graeme an emotional balance unmatched in any American leader I have studied except George C. Marshall and Dwight D. Eisenhower.

One General that came close to Graeme’s use of solitude was James Mattis. He once stated that “an effective leader can maintain balance and reflect when others are simply reacting.” It should come as no surprise that Generals Lamb and Mattis are close friends and see the world in much the same way. Graeme often spoke of events and the need to anticipate them, and to never simply react to them, but to shape them.

Graeme never unintentionally showed emotion. He was cool, but not cold. That is a very hard emotional state to maintain. I believe Graeme was also able to stay balanced because he was grounded in his family life. We never discussed being a family man but I was able to

witness it when we traveled through the UK or stopped in London on business. I think one of the most important things I took from my service with Graeme was the calmness you can gain by being a better family member, by being a good father and husband. That is not something you usually get from military service as so many supposed great leaders let their family wither as they neglect all other responsibilities outside their units. In the end I didn't just get to work for a great leader and take part in shaping international events. I got to learn the importance of being devoted to your family, your men, your mission, and most importantly to be a loyal friend.

If you can fill the unforgiving minute

With sixty seconds' worth of distance run,

Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it,

And—which is more—you'll be a Man, my son!

Jason Criss Howk is a retired US Army Foreign Area Officer and spent 2009 and 2010 in Kabul with Sir Graeme Lamb after Graeme retired from the UK Army. Currently Jason is an educator, writer, and hosts a [podcast](#) about Muslim cultures. Lieutenant General Sir Graeme Lamb continues to impact world events as an adviser to various entities and serves on corporate and non-profit boards. He continues to be a great son, husband, and father, and loyal friend to those he trusts.

The quotes in this article are sections of the Rudyard Kipling Poem "If—" that Graeme Lamb enjoyed.