

Robert Lexow Dilworth: His Life and Legacy (1936-2009)

Brigadier General Robert Lexow Dilworth, co-editor of this volume with Yury Boshyk, left us unexpectedly on June 6, 2009 when he suffered a fatal heart attack. Fortunately he left to us a brilliant example to follow and a vibrant legacy to draw upon, although we are also left with much that he envisioned, still to do. In this he is like Reg Revans who, before Lex, carried the flag for action learning while he lived and gathered up a growing group of committed people to carry on his work. Both men worked tirelessly and unpretentiously in preparation for the years ahead, challenging those willing to learn with and from each other and championing their best efforts.

General Dilworth, who also held the distinguished title of Associate Professor Emeritus from Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, Virginia, has been known to all his friends and many of his professional contacts and acquaintances as simply “Lex.” He viewed himself as an ordinary man doing ordinary things, with extraordinarily hard work and attentiveness. The fact that he was by no means ordinary is beside the point; if he made extraordinary contributions, he was sure that everyone else could do the same. He wanted to be called Lex, and we will do this, knowing that he would not set himself above anyone, face to face or in print, and risk ruining a possibly rewarding friendship. He made friends with great gusto, and with limitless appreciation of who each person had been, was, and yet might be.

Lex took five years (until 2002) to organize and write his personal history from records and recollections of the first 65 years of his life, more than 31 of which were devoted to his active service in the U.S. Army. If one adds to that the years he spent in college in the R.O.T.C. plus a prior period when he briefly belonged to the Air Force Reserve, Lex spent more than half of his life to that point in preparatory and active military service.

Lex titled his privately held memoirs the *Reflective Mapping of a Soldier's Life and Times*. While he was writing his 2008 book, *The Fogs of War and Peace: A Midstream Analysis of World War III* with his Israeli colleague, Shlomo Maital, Lex told us that he then realized-- perhaps as never before -- how much his soldier's life had influenced the evolution of his thinking and acting in the world. No small part of this was the experience of living and working in widely different cultures in his overseas postings. There was also a major shift in his world view in the months immediately after his Army retirement in 1991, when he simultaneously took on a civilian job in Florida and began his doctoral studies at Teachers College, Columbia University, commuting between these new “postings.”

A few references to his life before he received his R.O.T.C. officer's commission in the U. S. Army in June, 1959 may help us to see how Lex light-heartedly and youthfully became engaged in his military career. It appears that he found a real home in the service, made life-long friendships there, and contributed far beyond what was required of him to be “a good soldier.” This is the pattern he set for all of his adult life: friendship and giving, personal discipline and

impeccable accountability, and wondrously generous support to others so that they have been empowered to give their best as well. The Army slogan, “Be all that you can be” were not empty words for him.

Lex’s mother, Linda Lexow, and father, Robert Oliver Dilworth were born around the turn of the 20th Century, and he was their only child. Growing up in Chicago was apparently not a happy time for him, for he has titled that section of his memoirs “The Dark Years,” and says that although his mother, estranged from his father, held him “at the center of her life,” he lived what felt like a chaotic and insecure childhood. It was not until he and his mother moved south for “The Miami Years (1952-55)” in high school that Lex began to come into his own sense of worth. Though he never forgot childhood friends from Chicago and visited them regularly, it is in Florida that he grew more confident as a social individual who, for the first time, called himself “Lex” to his friends, and let that stand for his core identity.

One high school mathematics teacher, Sarah McClendon, made a particularly lasting impression. Even though he did not star in her classes, she went to bat for him for prom tickets and a college scholarship, and she wrote in his yearbook “*Keep a gain.*”

For him, he said, this translated into a personal mantra: “The key to life is to stay ahead.” From then on, this has obviously meant to him that if he tried, he could always gain just a little more, do just a little more, be just a little more than ever he *thought* he could. He learned to expect the same “keep a gain” from others, and has always helped them pick themselves up if they have fallen short of doing so. Thus it is not by accident that he has inspired and nurtured so many people who have happened to enter his sphere of influence or who have sought him out.

Lex grew up in an intensely patriotic and politically energized era, when Franklin D. Roosevelt was President, people were planting victory gardens (Lex’s father grew one) and we were all-consumed with winning World War II and honoring those who sacrificed their lives to fight it. Lex worked at typical jobs for youngsters in those days: paper boy, movie usher – whatever he could pick up for pocket money. Soon he figured out ways to do various kinds of trade-offs for profit. One summer, during high school, he went back to Chicago and worked with his father as an electrician’s apprentice. He tells us in his memoir that he learned a valuable lesson there. When a new air conditioning installation did not work in the former Palmolive Building (now the Playboy) during a ceremony called especially to celebrate its completion, specialists were flown in to fix the problem. An electrician’s apprentice asked if he could help, crawled under; found a switch that had not been turned on, and everything worked. What Lex learned from this was to “always involve everyone.”

A budding strategist and determined implementer of his strategies, Lex seems at an early age, unsuspected by almost everyone, to be heading for some sort of leading role in the world. He knew of family background in military service, for Dilworth ancestors had served in both the American Revolution and the Civil War. In light of the war news of the early 40’s and Dilworth

tradition, it is not surprising that he viewed a military career as one serious post-college option for him, or that he strategized toward that end by signing up for and completing reserve officers' training (R.O.T.C.) at the University of Florida at Gainesville. He was, at the time of college entry, already enrolled in the Air Force Reserve though he had, in his words, "side-stepped" basic training to finish high school.

At the university, he served as Commissary Manager of his Christian Cooperative residence hall, played harmonica in a band, and used an unreliable 1951 Nash bought for \$300. to get around in. He dated rarely and ran a dry-cleaning pick-up and delivery service on the side to make ends meet. Yet he had time for practical jokes and much camaraderie. He noted that he did not spend much time studying, and concentrated largely on the opportunities for social learning that he'd lacked in strict upbringing. In his final year, he carried a 40-hour course load successfully, graduating in June 1959 with a degree in Advertising and Public Relations and a commission as Second Lieutenant, U.S. Army Reserves. In August of the same year he married Marcella Aldridge, an English major at the university. After a short honeymoon, he left for Indiana for active duty and the 10-week Basic Officer Course while Marcella worked on her teaching internship and certification.

Lex was next posted to the U.S. Army Reception Center at Fort Jackson, South Carolina, where he served first in records and then was placed in charge of the Personal Affairs Branch. There, troops were interviewed and personal information recorded for emergency use. This seems to have been the first firm step in the direction of the high office he attained toward the end of his Army career, an appointment received soon after his promotion to Brigadier General. In 1986 he was named The Adjutant General of the Army (TAG), 54th in succession since the Continental Army of the American Revolution (1775), to take charge of a very wide range of personnel-related functions. One major part was supplying postal services for the entire military establishment of the United States, including Army, Navy and Air Force. He was also given charge for all security clearances for Army personnel, both civilian and military. Further responsibilities were overseeing the offices managing assessment of personnel physical disabilities. Lag time was a serious problem there.

In his memoir, Lex added that "Other core pieces of TAGO included Casualty and Memorial Affairs, Awards and Decorations, a Safety Office, a budget organization, and an organization called the Environmental Support Group" dealing with "legal matters related to the use of Agent Orange in Vietnam." He was expected, as a first priority, to "set up a Transition Management Program for those leaving the service." He accomplished the installation of this pioneer program after a round of briefings inside the government and the military. Soon it became clear that he was being asked to restructure the entire organization. This he proceeded to do, introducing expert systems, reducing lag time in processing by as much as 40%. Some functions were justifiably sent off to other organizations and some new functions came to reside in TAGO. One of these was the Central Identification Laboratory in Hawaii, tasked with recovering and identifying remains of U.S. military personnel who died in Vietnam and

elsewhere. Another piece involved interface with soldiers' dependents experiencing difficulties such as not receiving spousal payments, or intervening on behalf of those enlisted in the Army to fill high specialty positions in order to make repayment of student loans the enlisted men might have paid easily had they remained in civilian life.

Lex served two years as The Adjutant General before leaving for what would be his last Army assignment, with the Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) at Fort Monroe, Virginia. TRADOC is charged with responsibility for the entire Army training base, in all branches and at multiple installations. This includes the National Training Center at Fort Irwin, California, the training and deployment of Army Reserves, Force Modernization, and even law enforcement with its efforts to retrain and rehabilitate service personnel at the military prison at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. Internal training for his own staff people did not escape Lex's attention. He mandated appropriate computer literacy training and adjusted job descriptions accordingly. Curiously, one of the tasks Lex was called upon to accomplish --and one of the most satisfying ones --was a second round of activism around the Transition Management Program which he had spearheaded successfully while he was Adjutant General but which, in the early days of the George H. Bush administration, had been killed by stripping away its entire budget.

By this time, Lex was already self-started at work on an even more comprehensive transition strategy. He delighted in telling the story thus: "Seeing no Army strategy around how to manage our military personnel resources, I had personally designed a strategic framework to do that." He called his analysis and procedural planning to the attention of Major General Bill Reno, who was serving as the Director of Planning, Analysis, and Evaluation in the Chief of Staff's Office in the Pentagon. Reno's review consisted of examining "Godzilla," a preliminary schema for the new transition plan that covered 22 feet of wall space. But, despite its monstrous size and detail, Lex was assured that "Reno loved it." Then Lex was asked to graph and present the proposed strategy in such a way as to "show *how* what we did to manage and develop our personnel needed to change as we reduced the size of the Army." It took civilian support to override internal officer opposition and see this tasking through to its conclusion. The new Assistant Secretary of the Army for Manpower and Reserve Affairs, G. Kim Wincup, assigned Lex to head the task force to get the program installed. To make that order stick, it was reinforced to the Army Staff by Undersecretary of the Army John Shannon. The program, renamed the Army Career and Alumni Program (ACAP), was the first of its kind in the military, and has been a model for other services.

This was a triumph, a far-reaching contribution and likely the apex of positive changes Lex was able to make in the organizations he tackled in his long years of military service. The depth and extent of his distinguished Army career cannot possibly be given full justice in these brief biographical notes, and so these highlights must serve as exempla of the rest of the Army years that earned him promotion to General Officer standing. His memoir speaks of the outstanding soldiers and their officers that he admired, and frankly also, of some he didn't. He covers the events that raised his great interest in world affairs and political science, and reflects

upon how he grew personally in each new posting and assignment. One thing he concedes is that he never abandoned his enjoyment of practical jokes, even when they turned on him, since humor served to brighten the routines of the day. One thing he could not bear was a posting that did not challenge and engage his energies. Taking action to make bad situations better or good situations great has always been an ethical imperative and a driving force for Lex.

Army stories are augmented early on with interspersed and poignant memories of his personal life with his first wife, Marcella, and their children, Robert and Alexa. Though time spent with them was often far too short, Lex makes it clear that he loved being and sharing with them in fun like throwing Frisbees together in the Shenandoah parklands. Farther on, references to family also include his later marriage (1981) to Doris Smith Connor and life with her and her children, Suzanne and Eddie from a previous marriage. The second family was with him during his tour of duty in Germany and thereafter.

For *Fogs of War and Peace* Lex wrote this succinct summary of his service record, marking notable periods: “He served for over thirty-one years in the Army, including five years in Asia and another three in Europe. Six tours of duty were spent in the Washington area, two in the Army Chief of Staff’s Office in the Pentagon. He was appointed as the 54th Adjutant General of the Army (TAG). He served twice with infantry divisions, in Vietnam and Korea, including service as a division chief of staff.” His tour as chief of staff was with the 2nd Infantry Division during a confrontation with North Korean forces in 1976. Among many other positions of high responsibility, he also served at West Point as Comptroller of the National Guard and Director of Resource Management for the Academy.

Lex was determined to be a ready-to-fight “warrior first,” as the Army required of him and as he required of his own subordinates. But it was also obvious to him that organization and communication skills, as well as intuitive and strategic thinking, were among his strong suits. Fortunately he realized that these added up to major contributions he could make to the service itself. These would extend far beyond the Army into the post-service lives of the men and women he led, as well as reaching out among the civilian employees in his jurisdiction.

He was an inveterate learner, never believing that he knew all he wanted or needed to know. He had convictions and opinions, but they were always subject to revision in the light of new information. His capacity for careful listening was finely tuned, and if he found himself to have “heard” in error, he was the first to admit it. Once, when he was informally introduced as speaker to an audience of academics, he heard himself fondly characterized as “an education junkie.” At first he seemed a little taken aback, but then he considered and then conceded the point. His three master’s degrees (Public Administration at the University of Oklahoma, Education at Columbia University, and Military Art and Science at the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College), his doctoral degree in Education from Columbia University, innumerable Army training schools, and extended training programs at such schools as Harvard University, University of Michigan, and Northwestern University, added to his professorship at a major

university might well tell tales of a learning “addiction.” To further make the case, let it be noted that Lex had served as adjunct professor at college level before: at John Jay College for Criminal Justice, teaching public administration courses in 1984-85, at Boston University Overseas Program (Europe), teaching business courses in 1983-84, and at the University of Maryland (Far East) teaching political science in 1975.

Lex could not imagine being an insightful, effective leader without being simultaneously a heavy-duty learner. On the Myers-Briggs personality inventory, he scored off the charts as an “intuitive,” and this is often a characteristic of high potential and creative individuals. Certainly he learned to “read” people, see their latent capability even when it was hidden from them, and either coax or demand (and sometimes both) that they live up to it. He asked nothing of anyone that he was not willing to tackle himself, and believed that people respond best to a challenge that will stretch their known capacities and make room for new learning and development.

When they first met in 1991, it is easy to see why Lex and Reg Revans developed a natural affinity and a commonality of purpose. The General, a veteran warrior and recent manager-turned-dissenter in a State of Florida organization that was less than admirable, and Reg, a survivor of more than 60 years of battling inefficiencies and inhumanities in organizations, had much in common in their separate crusades against politicized or thoughtless, ill-conceived decisions and the disastrous fall-out of such errors. Lex had begun his weekend independent study Adult Education and Human Resource Development doctoral program (AEGIS) at Teachers College, Columbia University within the same week of accepting employment in Florida, where he had quickly established a lecture series for his new organization. When his university advisor suggested that he bring Reg to Florida to introduce Action Learning, Lex jumped at the opportunity. Here was the coming together of two outstanding mentors, neither motivated to outshine the other, but instead embracing a new relationship and all it promised for learning with and from each other.

Not long thereafter, Lex accepted a position on the faculty in the School of Education, Virginia Commonwealth University, where for the next twelve years, he taught adult education and human resource development (HRD). Steadily working to create curriculum and build the program there, making it more experiential and applied as well as raising the students’ achievement expectations, Lex began also to affiliate with other HRD professors around the country in the recently chartered Academy of Human Resource Development (AHRD). Lex brought Reg Revans to his University to speak to students and faculty and to work with them on an informal basis. The result was the formation of a small independent unit of the International Foundation for Action Learning, and action learning sets were formed in Lex’s classes and sent on their first missions as action learners.

Lex went further, bringing Reg to the 1994 first annual AHRD conference as a keynote speaker. A series of annual Action Learning pre-conference sessions were established, to afford continuity of information and to trade experiences among those who were interested in pursuing

the use of Reg Revans' precepts, in order to promote self-understanding and expand capacities to address organization problems.

As an outcome of his efforts and the U.K. contacts he had made, Lex was called upon to work with leaders from the Revans Centre for Action Learning at Salford University in England where the Revans archives are kept. An early joint project was the convocation of 80 interested leaders from 17 different countries to the First Action Learning and Mutual Collaboration Congress at Heathrow in 1995. Because of illness of the U.K. conference planner, Lex assumed major responsibility for organizing the Congress, recruiting participants, and serving on the advisory board. Lord Butterfield aided financially and supported the Congress by attending personally. Revans was present throughout the two days of action learning set work and reflections. This gathering set the stage for future working relationships with others across a broad spectrum of organizations. Most of these were in commonwealth nations, although some East European countries like Romania and Poland were involved in follow-up conversations and activities. At another point in 1995, Lex returned to England for the formal dedication of the Revans Centre for Action Learning and Research.

The following year, Lex organized a successful two-week program, entirely action learning based, with sets tackling troublesome aspects of the merger and reorganization of two hospitals in Manchester, complicated by mandates for reduction in force. While a few guest speakers were included to help kick off the program, the participants very soon expressed their preference for concentrating on the set work, faced as they were with unraveling serious problems and providing new insights within a short time frame. Thirty-one students from the U.S., Canada, and Australia participated. Only one or two had ever had prior experience with any health care facility. Separate reflection papers that Lex required on process and on personal gains and insights became 62 anonymous data sources for a qualitative research project jointly conducted by Virginia Commonwealth and Georgia State universities.

In 1997, Lex was asked to join the Research-to-Practice Committee of the American Society for Training and Development. He succeeded to the chairmanship in 2000, set several new tasks and directions, and mounted a campaign to learn more about challenges facing the HRD field from carefully selected, broad-based HRD and industry professionals in a Future Search Conference. Lex relinquished the chairmanship of the ASTD committee at the end of his term of office, and by May of 2002, he and a colleague at Georgia State University had begun experimenting with action learning groups that were composed of both Romanian and American students. There were unexpected challenges, some involving communications technology, but the outcomes were a useful first step toward bridging gaps between university education and business applications in this former Communist economy.

Since 1995 Lex had been actively collaborating with Verna Willis, originator and lead faculty member of the Human Resource Development degree programs at Georgia State University. They teamed up for a variety of projects, articles, and presentations intended to

advance the understanding and acceptance of action learning as a premier way to develop people and organizations. In 2003, they co-authored *Action Learning: Images and Pathways*, a book for which Reg Revans wrote an extensive foreword verifying that his own views of the process he pioneered had been carefully followed, based on the extensive interactions both authors had had with Reg over a period of years. The book is generally accepted as a basic primer for Action Learning. Both have contributed additional information and insights to this present volume, and are internationally recognized for their work.

In 2004, operating out of his own company, Strategic Learning Scenarios, Inc., Lex entered a post-university period of consulting in a variety of corporations and public sector organizations. When he was invited to participate in the Global Forum on Executive Development and Business Driven Action Learning in 2006, his unquenchable interest in international affairs and Action Learning came together and created a new burst of energy. From this came the agreement with Yury Boshyk to co-edit this book and its companion volume.

Lex Dilworth prophetically wrote: “If I have a gift in life, it has been the ability to focus all my energy and intellect at the point of need.” That is what he was doing when he was writing and editing for this book, and that is how he has always approached his work life. In his personal relationships, Lex has also learned and exercised what some call “emotional intelligence” with all the sensitivity, insight, caring, and effectiveness that the term implies. Those who have known Lex well are assured that he has been a worthy successor to Reg Revans, faithful to Reg’s conceptual frameworks and practices and believing whole-heartedly in the efficacy of traditional Action Learning. What Lex has further contributed is his own fine intellect, his enormous capacity for work, and his passionate commitment to the values and causes he believed in.

Verna Willis