

Courage:

Why Fostering Relationships Today Is Critical for Tomorrow

MAJ GEORGE J. FUST

The C-130 banks hard to the left and then levels out. The barren landscape races beneath its grey hulk. Moments later the sky is filled with paratroopers. These men are “Sky Soldiers;” they come from a proud lineage of airborne Infantrymen who made their mark fighting in battles from World War II’s Pacific Theater to Vietnam to present-day Afghanistan. The paratroopers of the 2nd Battalion, 503rd Infantry Battalion (The Rock), 173rd Airborne Brigade, do not know the meaning of “cannot.” They are Soldiers of action who take on the toughest assignments in the most remote locations on earth. On this day, they find themselves conducting an airborne operation in the African country of Cameroon.

Their task is to partner with the Cameroonian army and its recently established airborne infantry battalion in order to facilitate multi-national operations. Merely conducting a link-up would have been cause enough to define success. Sky Soldiers never just meet the standard and that is why on a warm spring afternoon they find themselves falling from the sky.

For decades the American flag has graced the right shoulder of Soldiers serving overseas. At the ground level, it is partnership at its best. The exchange of mementos is as frequent as ideas. Shared understanding and mutual respect can only be attained through joint hardship and execution. Sky Soldiers are no stranger to this idea and have embraced the Army’s culture of partnership.

Cameroonian paratroopers may not speak English as a primary language, but they do speak another universal language — that of courage. The battle-hardened veterans of both countries have found common ground in the notion of strength under fire. The willingness to push through pain and the journey of continual self-improvement is respected by both groups from vastly different backgrounds.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the predawn hours along a well-worn trail. Before the sun rises over the central highlands, eager men from multiple nations knock the morning dew off their running shoes. They stretch the sleep from their lean bodies and prepare for the challenge that awaits. No words are spoken. Only the movements required to prepare are made. Somewhere in the distance a rooster breaks the silence of the savannah and as if on cue the men begin their run.



Paratroopers from the 173rd Airborne Brigade jump into Koutaba, Cameroon, alongside Cameroonian paratroopers on 15 March 2014 as part of Exercise Central Accord 14. (Photo by MAJ Michael Weisman)



U.S. and Cameroonian Paratroopers conduct physical training during an exercise in Cameroon. (Photo courtesy of author)

One group runs largely because it is required. The other group knows no other way of life. An outsider might think the groups are homogenous with a single nation.

Running has the unique ability to transcend cultural and ethnic differences. As the paratroopers beat a steady course across the open plateau, they are greeted by the occasional ancient village or stray goat. They continue their movement in silence. This act requires no communication for understanding. All involved understand why they run. They share the warmth of the sun that just broke across the horizon. They feel the unevenness of the water-formed trail beneath their feet. Alone with their thoughts but united as a brotherhood they continue. They all know the pride of their country is at stake, for each man judges the other.

It is not an adversarial judgment but one that has been formed over years of training and fighting. Weakness is easy to spot and must be dealt with for the good of this group. Their competitive spirit and demanding intolerance of defeat pushes them onward. As the world around them begins to wake from the stupor of night, the men are greeted not with “bon jour” or “hall-o” but instead they hear “coo-raj.”

The term is universally stated by the young and old and continues to carry the men towards their end. Simply put, the French word means courage. It is doubtful that anything could motivate this group more.

As they near their destination the pace quickens, and the sound of labored breathing now accompanies the soft patter of moving feet. For Cameroonian and American alike the morning run was more than an aerobic exercise. It was a moment of quiet solitude — a break from the chaos that is never far from them. It allows each man the opportunity for self-reflection and personal growth. The finish line for this group is actually their start point. Having run together they have broken the barriers to mutual understanding and have forged a bond. Having never said a word, they have said a great deal. It is courage that brought them together. Courage that allows them to fall from the sky. Courage that will enable them to endure hardship to ensure the prosperity of others. Let courage forever ring in their collective minds. For with it, nothing can stop them.

The above vignette demonstrates interactions that occur around the world daily. It is imperative that Soldiers who travel abroad understand their role in developing strategic partnerships. The United States must leverage its allies and partners to defeat or deter adversaries. Rhetoric can never replicate or strengthen an alliance or partnership as much as two soldiers from different countries working together. Every personal interaction should be viewed as an opportunity to build confidence and establish trust. These relationships will be critical in the opening stages of future conflict when time or conditions prevent team-building exercises.

From rotations in Eastern Europe, security force assistance missions in Africa, and patrols along the DMZ in the Republic of Korea, the occasions to represent the United States’ values and capabilities are available. Given the frequent rotation of service members to these locations and others, units must prioritize building relationships and bridging cultural gaps. Technical deficiencies can be overcome with technical solutions. Trust must be earned. It must be continually reaffirmed. But once it is forged, it can serve as a powerful deterrent.

Our adversaries know U.S. Soldiers can run fast. They know other nations are also capable. They will attempt to breed resentment and competition because they fear facing a united front. At the individual level, every Soldier must have the courage to place collective security above their own needs. Allies and partners must believe the group will run together. That one will not leave the other behind. Let courage be the rallying cry for those who believe in a liberal world order. Let each of us have the courage to fight for a cause larger than ourselves. Courage is only the beginning, and yet, it is also the end.

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