

We Lead Human Warfighters

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For American Soldiers, warfighting is a life and death profession to protect the defenseless, our nation, and human freedom. In the disciplines required by our training, our organizations, and our needed personal behavior, we can lose sight of the humans we need to inspire, develop, lead, protect, and respond to. Instead, we may see the warfighter — NCO, officer, or Soldier — as only a component that fits into the military machine we are trying to manage. We may see a replaceable component and not an organic contributor to our mission success.

Modern warfare continues to become ever more complex. We keep nesting complex systems within complex systems and publishing great piles of detailed guidance and instruction, but we are continually challenged to find ways to manage these systems. It can be too easy to lose sight of the one essential component of each and every system — the human who makes our military work under the stresses of deployment and in the chaos of combat.

The core of our efficiency as a military rests on the competence, discipline, courage, self-sacrifice, and flexibility of the American warfighter. The foundation of our human qualities rests in human discipline and morale. We cannot coerce real discipline or morale; we must inspire and encourage it in the human head and heart. While physical compliance is the minimal demonstration of its presence, it is not the wholeness of it. We can see examples of fine drill and march performances but see no such capability displayed in the field. The professional qualities we desire and need are those that will unleash their owner's potential strength, competence, independence, and stamina at will and focused on the enemy's vulnerabilities. What follows are some examples to help remind us that everyone in our military is a human being — you, me, our seniors, and our subordinates.



Paratroopers with the 82nd Airborne Division conduct operations during Joint Readiness Training Center Rotation 23-07 at Fort Johnson, LA, on 30 April 2023. (Photo by SPC Luis Garcia)

Some time ago, I was tasked to design, resource, and command an air mobile long-range surveillance unit for a mission. Upon arriving to the area of responsibility, it was discovered that the size and ruggedness of the terrain prohibited most communications. We discovered that if we could establish a radio relay site on a particular mountain we could carry on the mission. I was warned that one of the NCOs had issues. I reviewed what was known of this former Marine and went to see him myself. What I found was a basically sound, experienced sergeant (SGT) who seemed a bit uncertain of himself at the time. I praised his wealth of experience and pointed out that we had to create a new team of mostly communications specialists to enable our task force mission. I told him we needed a solid NCO to provide control and arrange security for the team at a remote site, which was at least five hours away from cross-country support in an uncertain security environment, and asked him to volunteer. After a short hesitation, the SGT volunteered and we pulled his team together. We encountered no problems with this team or its operations during the duration of our mission. After returning to home station, I learned more of his previous problems, some apparently involving alcohol. Since returning to home station, however, he was an outstanding example of a professional NCO. Through a personal channel, I was told he revealed that since someone believed in him, he could believe in himself. Our warfighters are people, not mere components of our military machine.

Another example occurred many years ago while I was serving on a task force in the jungle. As a security team chief, I became concerned about a staff sergeant (SSG) who was a key leader on the team. He had become distracted and inattentive. I took the SSG aside and probed, looking for trouble spots. The cause was easy to find: His infant son was suffering from a serious medical condition, and not knowing his status was driving him crazy. This transpired in the days before cell-phone technology was available. Any communication we had with home station was through authorized use of government equipment. So one night, while our team was on duty on the perimeter, I made arrangements to relieve the SSG temporarily and for him to use our official equipment to call home for an update. I received flak from some for creating a hole in our security but got it covered. The SSG returned to us happily reporting that his son had turned the corner and was healing; he then returned to his normal stable, competent self. Humans can have families that can be the center of their lives; machine components do not.

After completing another mission, a challenge I faced was how to properly recognize members of the provisional task force. Several had done truly outstanding work enabling the task force to complete its mission in very complex conditions. After negotiating with a senior officer, I was authorized to submit four recommendations and identified four Soldiers from different contributing units. I described the excellent efforts of these Soldiers in the course of completing their normal Military Occupational Specialty (MOS) duties within context of the task force. Each of the awardees, their commanders, and some members of their units individually contacted me to thank me for recognizing their efforts. Brilliant psychologists have repeatedly pointed out the universal human need for recognition — to be acknowledged. Machine components have no such sensitivity. In addition to line Soldiers, don't forget to also consider your support personnel who work hard to supply units with food, fuel, ammunition, and equipment.

I went through basic training during the draft era. My platoon included a real mixed bag of enlisted reservists, National Guardsmen, draftees, and regular enlistees. We were given a drill sergeant, SGT Neil, who looked and acted as if he had just stepped off a recruiting poster. He never raised his voice, speaking clearly and making sure he was heard and understood. He never put up with any nonsense. He took the time to let us understand and get coordinated. Our very mixed bag of people came together quickly and began to work as a team. About halfway through basic, the platoon was called together and given shocking news: We were losing SGT Neil! It turned out he was a draftee and his time was almost up. Rather than taking his 10 days to clear post, he kept working with us and had only three days left to out-process. There had been nothing at all to indicate he was not a committed lifer. This loss seemed to tear the heart out of us. We were given another drill sergeant, SGT Joe, who was loud, authoritarian, and prone to angry outbursts. The platoon teamwork came unraveled. Our performance faltered, and SGT Joe gave us additional two-hour



Soldiers with the 1st Infantry Brigade Combat Team, 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault) scan for the enemy during a training exercise on 16 September 2023. (Photo by SSG Oscar Gollaz)

blocks of physical training (PT) to encourage us to better perform. During one of these evening sessions, SGT Joe berated us and said he knew who was holding us back. He then began to call out names of those who would be given additional PT to adjust their attitudes. As he called out names, a few of us realized that he was calling out only members of the platoon with a certain religious affiliation. After having to put up with such behavior, we were determined to send a delegation to the company commander early the next morning to present a complaint. The first lieutenant was at first reluctant to accept our story but became convinced by the number of us who had trooped into his office and by our earnest promise to bring in the rest of the platoon to verify our story. SGT Joe was removed that day, and a third SGT was brought in the next day to provide administration for the platoon until graduation. The platoon gentled down a bit and we graduated, not in the brightest of spirits, but we had gotten the job done.

The United States is the most heterogeneous nation in human history. We have citizens from virtually every nation and culture on this planet. Differences can lead to conflict if not understood, tolerated, and accepted. Warfighters are human and need to be both understood and able to understand others in order to be stable, happy, and competent in our tasks as members of a team.

In another example, I was privileged to work with a truly outstanding infantry company commander at the National Training Center at Fort Irwin, CA. One day we were in the field coordinating operations. As I was sitting in a Jeep, I noticed another vehicle nearby whose driver I knew to be a capable warfighter. This specialist (SPC) was obviously frustrated and agitated, apparently struggling with a manual. The captain (CPT) also noticed this agitation as he walked back to the Jeep. As busy as we both were, the CPT walked over and asked the SPC how he was doing. The SPC revealed that he was trying to prepare for common task testing and was really struggling with land navigation. The CPT asked if he could sit and go over the material with him, and the SPC accepted his offer. He then asked the SPC to take him through the problems he was facing. One problem at a time, the CPT asked the SPC to talk him through to the solution. The CPT never corrected the SPC beyond asking if he might have forgotten a component of the problem. A couple of times, the CPT provided low-voiced instruction regarding map reading or compass use. The SPC came to understand the basics that had eluded him and became confident of his knowledge. It was great experience watching a very good teacher at work. It was easy to see why this CPT had such a great reputation as he demonstrated his expertise and his concern for his warfighters.

Readers who are experienced parents probably recognize the truth in the observation that “our children never listen to what we say, but always watch what we do.” Seeing the behaviors of SGT Neil and this CPT remain vivid memories whereas hours of verbal instruction fall into the “Things Forgotten” column. The

basis of all that we do and try to get done is with and through human beings. We need to remember this no matter what confusion and time pressure we might be confronted with. And since we are all human, we will fail sometimes because we are not all knowing while often working in sometimes-confusing uncertainty. Some of us will fail through ignorance or some deficiency within us. As we are part of a team, the failure of one will affect others, senior and subordinate. The very best of us will recognize the failure and work very hard to fix the problem. It seems that most of us will sort of, maybe, patch things up.

Years ago, I was assigned to a senior command staff during a conflict where death and injury were daily possibilities. The great misfortune of this assignment was that my senior (a lieutenant colonel [LTC] acting as the executive officer) could only be described as heavy handed, self-centered, and incompetent. He once told me that “whatever the colonel does not know can’t hurt me.” This LTC avoided assuming any responsibility or even having the appearance of being responsible. I was to find out that he was detested by several seniors on the staff. In part for self-defense and admittedly a growing strong personal dislike, I minimized personal interaction with him. This limited my working sphere, constrained some options for planning and execution, interfered with work production and performance, and became an all-around unfortunate situation. At the time and after several efforts to create a real working relationship, however, this personal withdrawal seemed the only way to avoid possible open conflict. I cannot set aside the thought that I failed in my duties by being unable to find a way to develop a better working rapport with this senior while maintaining professional standards. We are all human — senior and subordinate — and can be imperfect and subject to failures. Our challenge is to recognize the situation, cope with it as best we can, and find ways to improve it.

Each of us has our foibles, weaknesses, and shortfalls that can affect how we lead subordinates and interact with our seniors. Leadership is difficult because it is a human interaction, and nothing is more daunting, more frustrating, and more complex than trying to lead men and women during tough times and working with and for our seniors. The structured and disciplined procedures of our military are designed from experience to cope with chaos and uncertainty and provide a machine-like efficiency to create stability. It works well when the involved humans are “all on the same sheet of music,” disciplined, motivated, and focused.

To borrow from ADM (Retired) William H. McRaven, we must never forget as leaders that there are those problems that need solving at the lowest possible levels of our units. Problems that, if not addressed, result in inefficiency, ineffectiveness, and low morale. Problems that the lower echelons in the organization may struggle to solve but that the leader can solve with one short directive. And sometimes the only way to ferret out these problems is to get out of our offices and talk to the Soldiers who do the hard work on our behalf. Human understanding and communication together are the lubricant for our team to oppose chaos and impose order on the situation to create the possibility of peace and stability.

The only essential elements in our defense establishment are the individual human beings who we hope to inspire, guide, support, train, and lead to find the strength, courage, and discipline within themselves to be their very best and do the very best at the time it is needed.

For those readers interested in looking deeper into human relations, I recommend Dale Carnegie’s *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. For those interested in becoming better leaders and making leadership work more effectively, I suggest reading *The Wisdom of the Bullfrog* by ADM (Retired) William H. McRaven. I believe this book should be on all military leadership schools’ required reading lists and wish it had been available when I began to assume leadership responsibilities.

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