Leadership Abrams Style

MAJOR GENERAL ALBERT H. SMITH, JR.
United States Army Retired

In the closing months of 1969, following President Richard Nixon's summer visit to Saigon and to our armed forces then fighting in southeast Asia, decisions were made in Washington to start bringing U.S. troops home and to begin turning the war over to the South Vietnamese military forces.

During 1969, U.S. and South Vietnamese forces had been highly successful in operations conducted in all parts of South Vietnam. It seemed to those engaged in the fighting that the war was being won. With the news of the pending U.S. withdrawal, however, the high morale that had characterized U.S. forces until that time was noticeably dampened. No soldier looks forward to a hard fight when rotation is in the offing.

The commander of the United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (COMUSMACV), General Creighton Abrams, recognized that there would be difficult times ahead for the Army's leaders, and especially for those commanding companies, batteries, troops, and detachments engaged in combat operations. He also felt there would be similar problems among troops assigned to headquarters and support units. Not as productively busy as when the war was being fought, they too might find time to get into trouble. He knew that the desire to get home would be universal among all of our soldiers then in South Vietnam.

General Abrams wanted to meet with every commander down through the company level to reemphasize the fundamental principles of leadership that would assist, encourage, and reassure them as they coped with the difficult times ahead. But that was physically impossible.

General Abrams, therefore, decided to put his message in a short letter, a copy of which would be sent to every U.S. commander in South Vietnam. He made it clear at the time that he did not want intermediate commanders changing his words.

After looking at and editing several draft letters, General Abrams was finally satisfied, and his approved letter, dated 20 January 1970, was reproduced and distributed.

The effort made to get the letter out did not stop with its distribution from General Abrams' headquarters. Special measures were taken, including spot checks in all major units, to ensure that every U.S. company-level commander had received his personal copy. Thereafter, the chain of command, from MACV down, took appropriate action to see that the guidance in the letter was understood and followed.

Here is that letter:

Leadership demands our constant attention, especially at the small unit level. It is here that a leader can influence most decisively and directly the conduct, performance, and welfare of his men.

Today's serviceman is the best educated, most intelligent, and most independent who ever served this country. He shows the same dedication and willingness to bear hardship and make sacrifices as his predecessors, but he wants to be recognized as an individual and to know "the reason why." Today's leader must take these traits into consideration.

This does not mean that there can be any degradation of standards. The leader must insist upon a discipline that will guarantee mission performance under trying conditions. He must deal with infractions promptly, fairly, and firmly.

Between the higher levels where decisions are made and the lower levels where they are carried out, the word doesn't always get through. There is often a block at the junior officer-NCO level which prevents the downward communication of requirements and the upward communication of reactions and ideas. Some leaders feel that explanations are unnecessary and that complaints reflect adversely upon their own leadership abilities. The same chain of command which passes orders down to the men must also pass their reactions up to the commander.

To compensate for this, some commanders use an "open door" policy; they will talk with anyone who comes in. But some men hesitate to penetrate the real or imagined obstacles between themselves and their commander. The "open door" works best when it swings both ways. A man must feel that he can frankly present complaints and ideas to his commander. On the other hand, the commander must get out and talk to his men, get them to talk to him, and find out what is going on. The result of this two-way contact will be mutual respect and mutual trust.

Another approach is the "open forum," a recent example of which is the junior officer council. This is an excellent means of improving understanding, but it must be kept under close command control and

supervision. The "open forum" cannot be allowed to become an organized protest session; commanders must guard especially against the outsider who would use this as a device for mass agitation.

Men in combat or hard at work have little time to reflect on their problems, real or imagined, because they are too busy. But when the tempo of fighting and working decreases, they have time to reflect. Little things are magnified. Rumors start. Tensions mount. Requirements come to be regarded as intrusions on individual rights.

. . . average American serviceman will believe what his leaders tell him as long as they do tell him. He must be told the reason for promotions, rewards, and punishments. He must be told what is expected of him and what he can expect from his leaders. The leader must take an active role in explaining his actions and his plans. He must get the word to his men and forestall rumors which inevitably arise when there is no explanation.

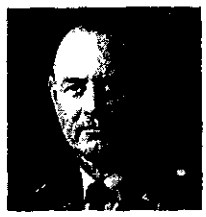
Our servicemen have met the test, and they will continue to do so in the future. They will do their job even better and with less friction when complete and mutual trust exists between them and their leaders.

The mission of every leader is to get the job done, to get the word out, and to treat every man justly and with a full appreciation of his individuality.

Having had the good fortune to work for General Abrams in 1966 when he was Vice Chief of Staff of the Army and again in 1968 when he was COMUSMACV, I was able to observe his military character and leadership under a wide variety of conditions.

General Abrams was eminently fit for the responsibilities and the loneliness of high command positions, intellectually as well as psychologically. He was professionally competent in the highest degree and was willing to expend the effort required to command.

He will take his place in our military history as a great and good man — a leader for all seasons.



Major General Albert H. Smith, Jr., U.S. Army, retired, was J-1, MACV, from July 1969 to March 1970. He also served in Vietnam with the 1st Infantry Division as assistant division commander and acting division commander. He is now Honorary Colonel of the 16th Infantry Regiment.

Combat Motivation

MAJOR ROBERT L. MAGINNIS

Lieutenant Eli L. Whitely was a platoon leader in the 3d Infantry Division in World War II. In December 1944 he was leading his platoon in savage house-to-house fighting through the fortress town of Sigolsheim, France. When his platoon came under intense mortar and machinegun fire, he responded by charging into a building alone and killing two enemy soldiers. Then he stormed into a second building, capturing eleven and killing two more, and into a third building, killing five and forcing twelve to surrender. These actions earned him the Medal of Honor.

When asked why he did these things, he said simply, "My motivation was to keep alive." It would appear, however, that there was more to it than that; in fact, he risked losing the very life he desperately wanted to preserve. (After all, his was not exactly a *safe* course of action.)

Understanding the actions of soldiers in combat is not a simple matter, because combat effectiveness appears to be more than the sum of its parts. We therefore need a holistic approach to understanding the subject — looking at the parts in relation to the whole. One such approach is to examine the interaction of three critical aspects of combat effectiveness — the battlefield itself, the technology we use on that battlefield, and the motivation of the soldiers fighting there.

Although Lieutenant Whitely's World War II battlefield was demanding, it pales in comparison with the one we can expect in the future. That battlefield will depend on initiative, depth, agility, and synchronization. Operations on it will be rapid, unpredictable, and violent. It will be characterized by significant dispersion, confusion, uncertainty, and unprecedented, discontinuous, rapid change. Past techniques that were based upon drill, rote, and continuous supervision will become obsolete, and the focus of decision and control will shift downward toward the squad and the platoon. It is at these levels that future wars will be won or lost.

As for technology, the nature of the future battle will be complicated by the rate at which technology changes. This evolution in deployment methods, associated hardware, and organization will continue to be unprecedented.

The qualitative superiority these innovative systems may provide cannot ensure victory in battle, however. They will be only as good as the soldiers who use them, and soldier performance is difficult to measure.

The problem is that neither the battlefield nor the technology we will use on it can be understood completely at any given time. This leaves us with the third aspect — combat motivation — as our best chance to influence future perfor-