

# OPEN LETTERS TO THREE NCOs



## First Sergeant Jeffrey J. Mellinger

"The Year of the NCO" is the Army's theme for 1989. So let's make some noise and tell all who will listen how good the noncommissioned officer corps is, what great things NCOs do, and how the Army would collapse without its backbone.

Laurels—aren't they great? But are you, the guy on the line, really a strong part of the backbone? Or are you just a strained ligament, a slipped disk?

Unquestionably, NCOs as a whole are deserving of praise. I am equally convinced, though, that many are not clear on how they can be better NCOs, because no detailed instruction manual is available on how to do it. Sure, there are field manuals and regulations, but what do they all mean?

I have therefore written open letters to the team leader, to the squad leader, and to the platoon leader in an attempt to distill some advice for each of them. (I got the idea from a squad leader of mine, who got it from a squad leader, and so on.) I hope those of you in each category will read the appropriate letter, pause to think, and see how you measure up against the rest of The Backbone.

### To the Team Leader

As a team leader, you occupy an important position in an

infantry company. You are responsible for the lives, the training, the health, and the welfare of your team members—a responsibility that does not end with the duty day.

It was no accident that you became a team leader. Someone saw in you the potential for excellence, the will to win, or some other quality, and chose you from your peer group.

Let's talk about what that really means.

As a team leader, you must be thoroughly proficient, both technically and tactically. You are the one who tells the soldiers how to wear their equipment, how to rig their rucksacks, where an assembly area is, how to move through woods, what they must do during halts, during contact, and during actions at the objective. You show soldiers, by example, how to search and secure prisoners and how to dig in. You show them how to care for and clean their weapons, how to prepare for inspections, and you enforce standards of cleanliness and conduct. You explain the unit's SOPs to newly assigned soldiers and ensure that they are followed. You answer questions about formations, haircuts and appearance, and standards of conduct. You must take your position seriously, for you will find that your team is a direct reflection upon you and your demonstrated, applied, and enforced standards.

You must know your men personally and professionally, and truly look out for their welfare. Talk extensively with each new man to find out about him—where he is from, what he has done, what his goals are, and why he joined the Army. Make him feel that he is truly a member of the team.

Caring for the welfare of the men is much easier said than done. Some of your responsibilities in this area are obvious—seeing that your men are treated fairly, that they get deserved time off, that their pay and personal problems are resolved quickly and confidentially. You demonstrate your genuine concern by counseling your men on their performance and professional development, and by making reward and punishment recommendations as quickly as possible.

If you're truly concerned about your team and its performance, you will take your responsibility one step further and continually inspect and make corrections—training to standards, not to time. You will be "hardcore"—not because of your stripes or position but because you want your team to be well trained, prepared for combat, and healthy and happy.

Keep your men informed. In the field, they must know everything *you* know about locations, missions, friendly units on the left and right, medical evacuation, fire support, what's on the objective, and the like. Give them all this information using combat orders, and keep them posted at every halt.

In garrison, it's your job to get your men prepared for the next day's training and to get them to training on time, in the proper uniform, with the proper equipment, ready to train. They should know the unit's long-range and short-range training plans, and married soldiers should be required to take this information home to their families, as operations security allows. (To be most effective, a soldier must have the support of his family.) **When you send soldiers on a detail, tell them where they're going, why, for how long, in what uniform, and who will be in charge of them.**

The motto of the NCO corps is "Lead By Example," and you must exemplify that motto. After all, you are the only fighting leader in the Army—Do as I do and "Follow Me!" If you are late, sloppy, disrespectful, need a haircut, or grumble when given a task or mission, then your team will soon be doing the same. But if you are able and willing, punctual, attentive to detail, and if you enforce discipline and standards, then your team will eagerly do likewise. Your soldiers will reason, "He is my leader; he's been here a while; therefore, what he's doing must be acceptable for me, too."

You must be there at first call, during barracks maintenance, drawing equipment, moving to training, during training, and during maintenance after training. You must continue to supervise your men until the job is done to the standards expected. If it is not, you should be the first to notice and take corrective action.

How can you evaluate your own effectiveness? Your unit's discipline, proficiency, esprit de corps, and morale are the indicators to evaluate. Do your soldiers get into trouble on or off duty? Do they display proper regard and respect for orders or authority? How well do they salute? Do they command parade rest when you enter their room? Do they stand proudly at the mention of the unit? Do they really know its history and heritage? How did they stack up with others during the

last SQT? Have they earned their EIBs? What conditions are their lockers, rooms, and military equipment in? Are they on time to formations and training? How do they perform in the field? Are they the first to notice the enemy? Are they aggressive in every task or mission? How do they fight? What are their actions during halts? Do they practice noise, light, and litter discipline? Are their personal and financial affairs in order? Do your answers to these questions meet the expected standards?

Finally, you must remember that you and you alone are responsible for your team, and that their lives, training, health, and welfare are in your hands. It's an awesome responsibility. Take it seriously.

## To the Squad Leader

I personally believe that the job of squad leader is the most important and rewarding one the Army has to offer. No first sergeant, colonel, or general has the kind of control over the destiny of soldiers that you have, or the ability to mold them. These other leaders may talk about how good "our" soldiers are, but the soldiers are really yours, and yours alone. Everyone above you is in a support role to help you do what you must do in combat—close with and capture or destroy the enemy and his equipment. Rarely does anyone else accomplish this task, so you must be good at it.

I think I can help you be a good squad leader if you will follow my advice and meet the demands placed on you by your soldiers and the Army.

You are the second most important person in the Army (the soldier is the first). You are directly responsible for training your squad as a team, maintaining discipline, instilling pride in unit and performance, and improving morale. Your squad's appearance, discipline, and proficiency are a mirror image of you and your abilities. What results are you expected to achieve? What do your own leaders and the soldiers you lead expect and demand from you?

Inspect your squad before any formation, training, or mission for proper hygiene, appearance, equipment, and physical condition. Make sure that lost or damaged equipment is replaced or repaired quickly and that all equipment and clothing fits, is adjusted properly, and is 100 percent serviceable. The only way to do this is through proper training, inspection, and reinspection.

According to Field Manual 7-70, you are a tactical leader, leading by example. You are the one who must take the plan and make it work through proper control, selection of fighting and weapon positions, and your ability to maneuver your squad against an equally determined enemy. If you do not take the business of training seriously now, you will never effectively accomplish your mission later.

Serve as an example in your personal and professional life. Both on and off duty, conduct yourself as a true professional. If you do, no question will ever be raised about your integrity, loyalty, values, or morals. Quell rumors and gossip instead of spreading them. Your loyalty to your superiors, peers, and subordinates will earn you the same loyalty from them. Never



discuss other NCOs or officers in front of your men.

Be professional. Your valuable experience can be beneficial to all, so share your information, techniques, and failures. Deal with the men in other squads or units only through their squad leaders—except when making on-the-spot corrections, and even then keep your NCO leaders informed of your actions.

Treat your team leaders with respect; give them an opportunity to make decisions, to fail, to learn. Seek out their opinions and advice. Train them to train their soldiers, and also train them to take your place when the time comes. At the same time, watch the platoon sergeant and seek advice from him, for you may be next in that job.

Assign responsibilities to your team leaders in garrison and in the field, and give them a chance to lead and learn. Issue orders that are clear, simple, and well planned. Make sure they are carried out properly. Deal fairly and impartially with all of your men—give them all an even chance, regardless of race, creed, education, or ability. Encourage your soldiers to see you and other members of the chain of command or NCO support channel about problems, but try to resolve them at the lowest possible level.

Keep your soldiers out of trouble. "How can I do that?" you ask. "I can't control their every move." True. But disciplined soldiers rarely get into trouble. Soldiers whose leaders have weak morals will soon develop the same tendencies. Be the example, and get your soldiers out of harm's way; don't sit idly by and watch them get drunk, brawl, and embarrass the uniform.

Try to reward positive behavior more often than you hand out punishment, because rewards produce the fastest, longest lasting kinds of changes in behavior. Think carefully before punishing soldiers, because punishment should be used only after counseling and corrective training have failed. Soldiers

should perform out of pride and respect rather than out of fear or intimidation.

Lead the way in difficult tasks or maneuvers. Share hardships and discomforts with your men—don't use your rank or position to evade or shirk them.

Be friendly, but always professional. Remember that familiarity breeds contempt. In all but official morale and off-duty activities, socialize only with other NCOs. Require that all squad members address each other properly and that they observe all the customs and courtesies of the Army.

Read and understand regulations, SOPs, and training manuals so that you can explain, demonstrate, and train your squad to those standards or higher. Engage in occasional "bull sessions" with your men to gauge your effectiveness as a leader. Remember the indicators of leadership? Discipline. Proficiency. Esprit de corps. Morale. Evaluate these indicators continually. Talk on a man-to-man basis when discussing performance, complaints, or problems. Learn and apply the rules for counseling, and remember confidentiality as it applies.

Participate in physical training, organized athletics, and social activities with your squad members, and show them an example of the standards expected—you. Expect your men to work hard because you do. Work during the duty day, and take all training as seriously as though your life depended on it, because it does. Be there as long as one man needs help, for yours is not a nine-to-five job. Never waste your soldiers' time, conduct poor training, or let their problems go unresolved or unnoticed. And don't rest or eat before they do.

Avoid doing or saying things that discourage your soldiers. Instill discipline through earned respect and loyalty for you and your authority, improved by challenging, rewarding, and superior training. Never go in "half-stepping." If you're not motivated to excel, how can you expect your soldiers to be?

Keep your superiors informed on the status of your job and your soldiers. Always be honest. Stand by your soldiers through good and bad, thick and thin; it is this kind of loyalty that binds the squad, platoon, and company together. This is not to say that you should try to lie or cover up failures or mistakes. Mistakes will be made, but hiding the truth or lying will never be forgiven or forgotten. Your credibility and reputation is on the line, and so is that of the rest of the NCO corps.

Be punctual, dedicated, honest, caring, honorable. Have the best haircut and uniform, the shiniest brass and boots in the squad. While some may argue that "pretty soldiers" may not know how to fight, "pretty soldiers" demonstrate pride, attention to detail, and discipline—all trademarks of the best fighters in history. Make on-the-spot corrections, punish wrongs, and make extra efforts to reward excellence.

Finally, never forget your two most important duties: Accomplish the mission, and look out for the welfare of your troops.

## To the Platoon Sergeant

Since I've told the team and squad leaders all that is required of them, it may seem like there's nothing left for you to do. In fact, many soldiers may think that all you do for a living is provide "beans and bullets." But you are the Army's Master Trainer; you have to train them all—grenadiers, machinegunners, radio operators, privates, sergeants, and lieutenants. Yes, lieutenants.

Training your platoon leader is not only your job but your responsibility. If he fails, the platoon fails, and so do you. As the senior and most experienced NCO in the platoon, you must pass on the benefit of that wisdom and experience to your platoon leader as well as to the soldiers.

A new lieutenant is a precious thing, a rare commodity, enthusiastic and eager to learn. Don't take advantage of him, but train him, correct him when he needs it (remembering that diplomacy is part of your job description), and be ready to tell the world proudly that he's yours. If you are ashamed of him, maybe it's because you've neglected him or failed to train him properly. Do something about it. Show a genuine concern that he's learning the right way instead of the easy way. But be careful not to undermine his authority or destroy his credibility. Remember that order and counter-order create disorder.

Ask any colonel or general, and I'm sure you'll find that he got as far as he did partly because of his first platoon sergeant, and the one thing that sticks in his mind is that his particular NCO was never afraid to train his lieutenant. Train yours, and you'll soon find that the two of you will be a real team.

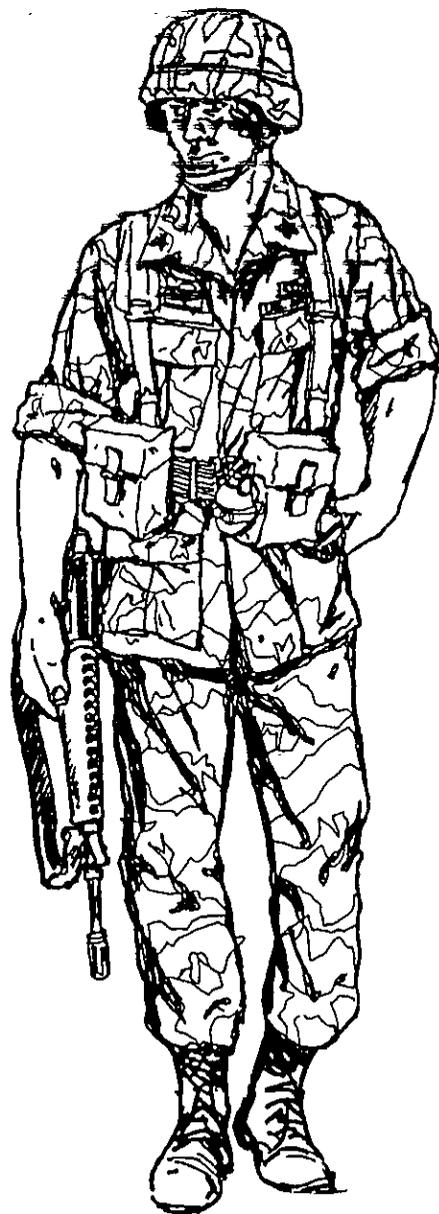
Don't neglect your own training, though. As you train your platoon leader, remember that you are also training yourself to do his job in case he should be killed in combat. Set your sights on a 100 percent score on your Skill Qualification Test. "Can't be done," you say? I've done it more than once, and I know many other NCOs who have. Do you have to be a proficient test taker to do that? No, just an example-setter. How can you be an example for your soldiers if they achieve

higher scores on a test than you do?

I'm not just talking about SQTs, but also about PT tests. It's well known that you can't lead from the rear. (How many times have you been professionally embarrassed to find out that the straggler to the rear of the formation was a platoon sergeant or higher?) You must be the premier example of physical and mental fitness, proficiency, and professionalism. It can be no other way. If you fail in this, your soldiers will lose respect for you not only as a person but as their leader. (Where's your Physical Fitness Excellence Badge?)

Train and support your squad leaders. You already know from experience that their job is the toughest. They cannot do this job effectively if you don't give them all the support, assets, and quality training time that they need to do it. Neither can they do it if you allow their soldiers to schedule appointments during training time. Schedule them for an off day.

Anticipate training aid requirements, schedule classrooms,



and supervise and spot-check classes. Order rations, talk with the XO and the first sergeant about transportation and maintenance requirements. Act instead of reacting to the squad leaders' needs.

Make corrections to their tactics and the employment of their squads. Supervise administration, logistics, and maintenance. "My gun's jammed, the radio won't work, and this MILES gear is no good" are all signs of poorly trained and unprepared soldiers.

Train the squad leaders to train their soldiers. If you do it all yourself, you'll deny your junior leaders the opportunities for trial and error that will make them great. And if your squad leaders are not prepared to do your job as well as you do it, if not better, you still have one more task to work on before you close the CP.

What do you do in the field? You should be the one to put in the security, crew-served weapons, and squads. Then show the platoon leader what you've done so he can make any necessary changes. Are you active in the security plan, or do you stay in the CP and wait for the squad leaders to check in? Are you listening intently to individual squad orders, or do you sleep through them? Where are you at 0300 when the security patrol reports in to the platoon leader?

Do you occasionally walk the perimeter, or are you content with the idea that there is no enemy activity? (I am constantly reminded of the 90 or so soldiers in an African country several years ago who all had their throats slit by an enemy force. They had posted no security.)

Have you put your medic to work checking your soldiers? Has he done a foot check today? Disease and infection historically have cost us more casualties than anything else. Have you really planned your medical evacuation procedures, or have you simply paid them lip service? When was the last time you made your squads carry a victim on an expedient litter for any real distance? Just saying, "Smith and Jones are the litter team" simply won't fly. Are you there for all training, or do you find an excuse to be absent?

Counseling is also an important part of your job, and it includes all the members of your platoon. (Counseling your platoon leader takes the form of guidance and suggestions, but it is counseling all the same.) Counseling your subordinates is critical to success. If your juniors don't know what they're doing wrong and what you want them to do to fix it, they'll never improve. Evaluate each success and failure on its own merits and, unless safety is involved, counsel your junior leaders in private. Look them in the eye and tell them just what you think they're doing wrong, but finish every counseling session with something positive about them. If you leave them

with an "atta-boy," you won't lessen their mistakes, but they'll accept the counseling more readily than they will if they hear only a steady barrage of criticism. During after-action reviews, don't pick apart the soldiers' every action but concentrate on the major points, good and bad.

How do your soldiers perform on Soldier-of-the-Month boards? Are they ready for promotion, going in with every possible edge? Can you tell them what is required for promotion to specialist rank? What about promotion to sergeant? How much time in grade and service? Do you check their official photographs and help them write for copies of their microfiche records? Are you able and willing to tell a soldier that he's what the Army needs and that he ought to reenlist? And are you equally prepared to look a soldier in the eye and tell him that he's not cutting it, that he's overweight, and that you intend to have the commander bar him from reenlistment because of his poor performance or disciplinary record?

Although leaders need to be given the freedom to experiment and succeed or fail in order to learn, safety can never be sacrificed. Safety begins with the plan, and every operation or movement should include a safety plan.

You are the safety expert. You have to know whether the sectors of fire are safe, whether soldiers should be riding in vehicles without restraint devices, and whether there are weak swimmers in the platoon.

And you also have to be prepared to conduct safety briefings. Brief safety not only for training but also for off duty time. Make sure your soldiers know the proper misfire procedures for weapons and demolitions, or what will happen to them if they open the automatic chemical alarm without disconnecting the power source. You should teach and enforce safety measures right along with tactics, maintenance, and the school of the soldier.

Yes, it's the Year of the NCO, and we justly deserve the recognition. We have worked many long and hard hours for the distinction. Let's not waste it or let its significance be diminished because we don't have the energy or the desire to go one step further and really set the example.

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