



A SALUTE TO THE GOLD BAR



At about this time each year a group of young men from a variety of training backgrounds pin gold bars on the collars of new uniforms and take up the profession of Infantry leadership. If you are in this group, the weeks immediately ahead, which will be dedicated toward preparing you for your first command, are too short—always too short to allow much time for pep talks, emotional preparation, or a real orientation on the challenge you have accepted. The men who must train you to lead may not have an opportunity to really identify your profession for you. Well, I have a little more time to think about such things. Pardon me now if I get a little parochial.

Whether you come from a service academy, ROTC, OCS, or direct from Fort Boonock, and whether you read this enroute to Fort Benning or Quantico, you are about to take on the toughest leadership assignment of a military career. Toughest because your challenges will be the greatest at a time when your experience is the least.

You are destined to lead men—hard, critical men who will respond to you only because you demonstrate to them that you are as good as or better than they are in every professional respect. The battalion commander can get away with not knowing all the skills in his command so well as the men who practice them daily. The platoon leader cannot.

In the best of circumstances, you will cause your men to do things that challenge them, tire them, and sometimes bore them, and you will make them do these things with enthusiasm and determination. You must, and will, use your chain of command, but at your level that chain is a short one. Never again will you deal face to face with so many individuals on a regular basis.

You have accepted the proposition that if you go to combat you will be among the men the enemy wants most to kill first.

You will be the professional director and personal counselor to men much older and more experienced than you are. They will think that if you are fit to hold the rank at a young age then you should be fit to give sound direction and valuable counsel, and they will resent your failure in either area.

Along with this professional and intellectual commitment, you are obligated to maintain your physical condition in a state only slightly below that required of a full-time athlete. Through a combination of stamina and will, you may often send your exhausted troops to rest but turn yourself immediately to another task.

You will share your triumphs with four squads of men and will bear your failures, and theirs, in what will feel like total isolation. A platoon may be better than its leader, but it is never worse.

You will watch some of your brightest ideas shatter against the anvil of reality, without even the opportunity to sulk about it for a while.

You'll sometimes wonder if people take you seriously. They do.

You'll question whether the rank you hold is an adequate crutch against poor leadership. It isn't.

On an hour-by-hour basis you will find yourself in circumstances that test your will, your skill, your strength and your judgment.

You'll love it. INFANTRY salutes you.

(Written by Lieutenant Colonel Thomas J. Barham, in his Editor's Note (INFANTRY, July-August 1975, inside back cover.)