

The Role of Character in

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Character, comprised of a person's moral and ethical qualities, helps determine what is right and gives a leader motivation to do what is appropriate, regardless of the circumstances or consequences.

—Army Doctrine Reference Publication (ADRP) 6-22, Army Leadership (2012)

Great Army leaders are humble soldiers who attribute their success to the men and women who work for them. They step aside while their officers and soldiers receive the awards and accolades they deserve. Their character enhances their leadership.

One of the Army's great leaders of character was Glenn K. Otis. Among his many command assignments during war and peace, he commanded the U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command, and U.S. Army Europe and Seventh Army/Central Army Group. Gen. Otis spent the last four years of his life in Carlisle, Pennsylvania—maintaining a low profile as a quiet, unassuming retired officer. If you met him casually, you would never know of his impressive career, much

less his heroic actions during the Vietnam War.

A Retired Officer

I first met retired Gen. Otis at a military social function shortly after he moved to Carlisle. I attended alone and saw him standing by himself in a large, noisy room full of talkative guests. I thought I recognized him, but I was not sure. I introduced myself as Bob Gerard, and he replied casually that he was Glenn Otis. Although I had not been able to recognize the face, I recognized the name immediately. Had I not recognized his name, I doubt he would have tried to tell me about his former rank or his achievements. We talked for a good while, and I told him about a local breakfast club to which I belonged—a small group of Army retirees who met each Saturday morning to solve the world's problems. Soon, he was a regular member.

At our first breakfast meeting, he made a point of saying he preferred to be called "Glenn" rather than "General Otis." However, we would never be able to refrain



Gen. Glenn K. Otis, commander, Training and Doctrine Command, visits with soldiers stationed at Fort Jackson, S.C., 9 February 1983.

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Effective Leadership



from calling him “Sir.” Otis did not talk about his accomplishments in the service although they were many. Instead, he would talk with pride about the great troopers he commanded over the years.

A Combat Commander

Otis enlisted in the Army in 1945 and spent three years as an enlisted man before attending West Point. I am certain his experience as an enlisted man instilled in him an excellent sense of basic

soldiering—along with all its hardships. The facts are easy enough to find about his progression in the Army—schools, promotions and awards, and the positions of great responsibility he held as he moved up in rank from private to

four-star general. Beyond all that, there was something very special and down-to-earth about Glenn Otis; hence, my quest to find out more about this great soldier whose character seemed so exceptional.



Photo found at <http://army.togetherweserved.com/>

Lt. Col. Otis with the troops from 3rd Squadron, 4th Cavalry Regiment, 1968.

I found proof of Otis' character in his service as a combat commander in 1967 and 1968 in Vietnam. In my view, nothing exemplifies the personal attributes of Glenn Otis more than his combat experiences in Vietnam, where he commanded the 3rd Squadron, 4th Cavalry Regiment, 25th Infantry Division, and where he was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross for gallantry in action during the Tet Offensive in 1968.

25th Division Cavalry Squadron. Otis took command of the squadron in December 1967. The 25th Division's cavalry squadron was a mobile force consisting mostly of tanks and armored personnel carriers. Each M48 tank had a powerful 90 mm gun, a .50-caliber machine gun mounted on top of the turret, and an M60 machine gun mounted near the main gun. The M113 armored personnel carriers carried troops, and each carrier included a mounted .50-caliber machine gun and one M60 machine gun mounted on each side of the vehicle. In addition to three cavalry troops (A, B, and C Troops), there was an aviation unit (D Troop), consisting of light observation helicopters, troop carriers, gunships, and an aero-rifle platoon.

The 25th Division was located in III Corps, an area including the capital city of Saigon. The squadron's mission was to secure the northwest main supply route from Saigon to Cu Chi (the division's base camp) and then from Cu Chi to Tay Ninh, a span of some 80 kilometers. I knew the area well based on my first tour in Vietnam in 1966. Moreover, my younger brother, a

member of the division, was wounded in the area—at a place called the Hobo Woods. The units that made up the cavalry squadron were mobile, packed a lot of firepower, and could operate independently.

The road from Saigon to Tay Ninh. When the Vietnamese launched the Tet Offensive in January 1968, the elements of then Lt. Col. Otis' squadron were distributed at key points along the approximately 50 miles of highway from Saigon to Tay Ninh. In no way were Otis' fighting elements consolidated in a position to respond promptly to what turned out to be a country-wide, major North Vietnamese offensive. Nevertheless, 3-4 Cavalry played a vital role in preventing the air base from being overrun during the major battle of the war.

In their book *A Hundred Miles of Bad Road*, authors Dwight W. Birdwell and Keith William Nolan narrate several stories that illustrate Otis' leadership style.¹ Author Birdwell served in the 3rd Squadron, 4th Cavalry Regiment, under Otis. Some of the stories recounted here come from Birdwell's book and some from interviews and correspondence with veterans of the squadron.² Some information comes from Otis' account, recorded when he was a student at the Army War College.³

Early in his assignment, it seemed Otis made a personal impression on all the members of the squadron. A tank commander reported that he could not remember the squadron commander they had before Otis arrived. In fact, he could no longer picture the former commander, but he said everyone knew and remembered Otis because he was nearly always with the soldiers checking to see how they were doing and what they needed.

To secure the highway, the squadron was spread out in smaller units at key points on the long, dangerous road. Otis would cruise up to their location in his command track, without an escort, just to be sure they were alert and okay. Otis' frequent presence was unlike that of a micromanager; he trusted his subordinates and made sure they had what they needed to perform their tasks.

The tank commander reported that as part of the road security mission, there were places where the main supply route passed through local villages. In those cases, at night the infantry squads would dismount from their carriers and provide flank security

as the armored vehicles moved through the village. The soldiers did not like doing that because it was so dangerous. On occasion, Otis would dismount and go out on flank security with an infantry squad. One of the troopers who hated those missions said that when he saw Otis dismounted with them, he felt he could not complain about his duties.

One of the troublesome areas along the highway was near the village of An Duc, north of Cu Chi where the Viet Cong repeatedly placed mines in a culvert under the road. Birdwell and Nolan describe an incident in which Birdwell's section in Charlie Troop was assigned the mission of overseeing the culvert area during the hours of darkness. The small unit was carefully concealed in a location near the culvert, waiting patiently and watching for signs of any enemy movement.

Suddenly, Birdwell said he heard a low, rumbling noise. It came closer and closer from behind his location. Finally, in the darkness, he could make out a command track vehicle and the silhouette of Otis on top. The vehicle stopped. After several minutes, Otis quietly contacted him by radio. From his location, Otis, using a night-vision scope, could see a group of Viet Cong moving quietly toward the road and the culvert. He directed Birdwell's troops to a position where they could engage the enemy soldiers. The enemy never knew what hit them. The next day, Otis congratulated and praised the soldiers of Charlie Troop but never took credit for his part.

The exercise of mission command. Otis' leadership style made a lasting impression on a commander of B Troop. On occasion, Otis would ride with the troop while they were securing the main highway between Saigon and Tay Ninh. Before they moved from one location to another, the new troop commander intended to brief Otis on their plans and progress. Otis listened to the new troop commander's first briefing. The second or third time the commander began a briefing, he says Otis interrupted. Otis explained that he had given the troop commander a mission to carry out as he saw fit. He said he did not need to know all the details. He was there in case they needed additional squadron and division assets to help them in an expanded fight. In fact, Otis said each of the cavalry troops conducted night operations in different ways. He viewed this as a good thing because it presented the enemy with a problem of unpredictability.

In 1967, the Army had pulled a young signal officer out of school and assigned him as the squadron signal officer under Otis. The lieutenant confessed his fear of failing to his new leader. Otis sat beside him, looked him squarely in the eyes, and tapped him on the knee. Otis encouraged the lieutenant, saying he only needed to follow him—and the lieutenant would be fine. The young officer believed Otis. Eventually, that lieutenant forgot the name of every other officer he knew in Vietnam, but he remembered Glenn Otis all his life because he was a man first, and a colonel second.

Otis had a great sense of humor. During a contact with North Vietnamese Army forces in Hoc Mon in 1968, shortly after taking command of the squadron, he landed near one of the C Troop tanks. The tank commander kept a pet monkey tied to the cupola on a leash. When Otis arrived, the commander was



Gen. Glenn K. Otis, commander in chief, U.S. Army Europe and Seventh Army, during a ceremony commemorating the 40th anniversary of D-Day, 2 June 1984.

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standing next to the tank, and the monkey was perched on the cupola. Otis looked at the commander and then the monkey. He asked jokingly if the monkey was in command of the tank. The commander said it was not, and he wondered why Otis had asked. Otis said he heard a lot of squeaking when he listened to talk from this tank on the C Troop net. Now that he had seen the monkey near the cupola, he assumed it was the tank commander, and the squeaking on the net must have come from it.

The Tet Offensive. Except for a few keen observers, the Tet Offensive came as a surprise to U.S. forces. At first, it was thought to be a diversionary action before a major North Vietnamese offensive in the Khe Sanh area along the demilitarized zone. Instead, the action was a carefully planned country-wide offensive including both North Vietnamese and Viet Cong units. When Otis was ordered to respond to enemy contact near the southwest corner of Tan Son Nhut Air Base, he had no idea of the magnitude of the carefully planned North Vietnamese attack, nor did the major U.S. and Vietnamese commands. The air base was one of five major facilities targeted in the Saigon area. In their road security mission, elements of Otis' cavalry squadron still were distributed at key points along the 50 miles from the southwest portion of Saigon north to Tay Ninh.

When Otis received the order to deploy the squadron south, only two platoons of C Troop along with D Troop (the air cavalry unit) were available at Cu Chi, but there was initially nothing to indicate the attack on the air base was anything more than a hit-and-run raid by a small guerrilla unit. However, the enemy force attacking Tan Son Nhut numbered some 2,665 Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army soldiers. The small but powerful force from 3-4 Cavalry charged head-on into the lead elements of a major offensive.

The battle that followed remains a testament to the bravery and courage of Otis and the troops assigned to 3-4 Cavalry. The commander of C Troop led the way. Many awards for valor were presented afterward. C Troop took the heaviest toll as thousands of green tracers, along with a multitude of rocket-propelled grenades, hit the men and armored vehicles making contact at the point of the penetration at the air base. Otis quickly took command of the entire battle in the Tan Son Nhut area.

As B Troop joined the fight at a critical time of the engagement, Otis recommended to its commander that he maneuver the troop to hit the attacking enemy from the flank. In his notes, the troop commander recounted that Otis routinely would tell subordinate commanders that he recommended certain actions—rather than directed them. Otis left the detailed decisions to his subordinate commanders, allowing them the flexibility to modify the plans on the fly if they found it necessary.

According to verbal accounts of soldiers who were in the combat zone, Otis' helicopters were shot down as many as seven times. A specialist who was with him when a helicopter crash landed tells of Otis stepping out of the broken aircraft in the midst of the ongoing battle with bullets flying left and right. He walked a few yards away and waited for the next bird to pick him up. He remained cool and calm, as if he was in New York City waiting for a taxi. Miraculously, he was able to walk away from these damaged aircraft without serious injuries.

During the Tet Offensive, Otis often was flying a few hundred feet above his troops. He arranged resupply of ammunition to the embattled C Troop and evacuated the wounded in his helicopter. He stayed in the midst of the battle from the beginning to the end. Four of his aircraft were downed during the battle for Saigon. A private seriously wounded during the battle referred to Otis as a problem-solving, decision-making, loyal, and brawling lieutenant colonel.

Despite his genuine concern for individual soldiers, Otis was no pushover. An event during the battle for Tan Son Nhut Air Base illustrates how assertive he could be. The battle was growing larger, and reinforcements began to arrive. The senior commander, a full colonel, called by radio to say that he was an O-6, Otis was only an O-5, and that Otis had to provide a situation report so the colonel could take control of the field. Otis replied that he would not relinquish control of the field until the battle was over. He said the colonel was in support of his unit. The colonel hesitated and then agreed, asking where Otis wanted the incoming troops.

A farewell. Glenn Otis first was wounded 31 January 1968 during the Tet Offensive. He was wounded again in May and medically evacuated. He wrote a farewell letter to the members of the squadron in June. Although he claimed he did not want the letter to drip

with sentiment and nostalgia, a certain amount of sentiment was apparent. He expressed the great respect he had for his troops. He wrote that a piece of him always would be with the “3-4 horse,” and not the piece that Charlie got. He said he never would forget some of the battles and the hard times they went through together.

Enduring Character

After the war, the squadron held reunions every two years. Otis attended when he could, even after being promoted to general officer. The troopers found him a fascinating storyteller as well as a good listener. Otis seemed to remember every one of his soldiers, living or dead. He corresponded with several and helped them and their families when he could. For instance, he wrote a letter to support the application of a former soldier’s son to the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. In later years, Otis continued to pursue the award of the Medal of Honor to Dwight Birdwell, a Native American who had played a heroic role in the battle for Tan Son Nhut.

Mutual respect. Throughout his life, Otis was known to respect the whole person and overlook differences. For example, a junior officer who fought alongside Otis during the battle for Saigon later became an avid antiwar demonstrator. Their friendship and mutual respect endured nonetheless. One of his former captains said that to serve under his command was a once-in-a-lifetime privilege.

As a soldier and in retirement, Glenn Otis needed no special paraphernalia, no grenades hanging from his belt, no crushed hat, no pearl-handled pistols, no dog on a leash, no smoking pipe, no dangling cigar. People who met him could tell he was a giant of a man, a true leader of men. Glenn Otis was a person of character.

Timeless leadership. As I reflected upon my quest to find out what was so special about Glenn Otis as a leader, it brought me back to my first meeting with him. The answer was right there in front of me. There he was, standing quietly alone; a humble and thoughtful man, openly friendly to a complete stranger. He connected with his officers and soldiers similarly. His soldiers did not feel they worked for him but that they worked with him. They felt Otis talked with them rather than to them. His sincerity, humility, and a real caring for his subordinates were the qualities that set Glenn Otis far above his contemporaries. His example of effective leadership is timeless.

Conclusion

Many leaders are respected. There is a distinction, however, between respect and reverence. In the Army, showing respect to leaders is a matter of obligation. Soldiers show respect by deference, courtesy, and obedience. Reverence, on the other hand, is respect earned. Soldiers who come to revere a leader show their respect through veneration. Glenn Otis was, and still is, revered by his troopers.

When I contacted the surviving members of the 3-4 Cavalry, I was surprised how often they said they loved their commander. This is rather unusual coming from a diverse bunch of rough, tough men, many of whom grew up during the 1960s in run-down neighborhoods or in poor, backcountry towns where survival was a challenge and authority was not well received.

Character does far more than help a leader “determine what is right” and “do what is appropriate,” as written in ADRP 6-22. The story of Glenn Otis shows how a leader of character can inspire men not only on the battlefield, but throughout their lives. ■

NOTES

1. Dwight W. Birdwell and Keith William Nolan, *A Hundred Miles of Bad Road: An Armored Cavalryman in Vietnam, 1967-1968*, (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1997). Excerpts paraphrased and used by permission.

2. I want to thank members of 3rd Squadron, 4th Cavalry, without whose help I could not have written this paper: Dwight W. Birdwell, Thomas Fleming, Rolland Fletcher, Jimmy Greer, Jerry

Headley, Oliver Jones, Ralph Martinez, Malcom Otis, Jim Ross, William E. Shaffer, and Robert Sevene. The surviving members of 3-4 Cavalry who contributed information consistently expressed their reverence and love for their former commander.

3. Glenn K. Otis, in “Vietnam Mechanized Operations Oral Histories 1965-1973,” (Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army Heritage and Education Center).