



By Example: 'Leaders Cannot Afford To Lose Their Soldiers' Trust and Respect'

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In this special edition of "By Example" the NCO Journal looks back at the 36-year career of Command Sgt. Major Thomas Capel.

Times were different 36 years ago when 18-year-old Pvt. Thomas Capel, a North Carolina native, enlisted in the U.S. Army. The country had only just emerged from conflict in Vietnam and was locked in the midst of the Cold War.

This is a month after a career that spanned more than three decades, Capel retired as a command sergeant major at a ceremony at Fort Bragg, N.C. where he

previously served as the command sergeant major of the 82nd Airborne Division.

Capel spent the majority of his career leading paratroopers from the 82nd. From squad leader to division command sergeant major, he served nearly 27 years as a paratrooper at Fort Bragg.

"There's something special about knowing you belong to an elite group of men and women," Capel said. "These paratroopers are so highly trained and are ready to perform any task anywhere in the world in defense of their country."

In his career, Capel saw missions shift from Cold War-era readiness to combat in Iraq (during two sepa-



Command Sgt. Maj. Thomas R. Capel speaks to friends, family and former colleagues during his retirement ceremony at Fort Bragg, N.C., Nov. Paratroopers assigned to the 82nd Airborne Division stood in formation during the event, supporting the grand finale of the former Division Command Sergeant Major's 36-year career. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Kissta DiGregorio, 82nd Airborne Division Public Affairs.)

rate conflicts) and Afghanistan, where he deployed to on six different occasions.

"During the 80s, we focused on developing what it meant to be a professional noncommissioned officer in the United States Army," Capel said. "It was important to re-establish the value and the responsibility of the NCO. As a corps we lacked the trust and discipline we needed to be the kind of leaders the Army was going to need in an uncertain future."

During his career, Capel molded Soldiers entering the Army as a drill sergeant and later trained and mentored NCOs at the XVIII Airborne Corps NCO Academy. It was in these roles that he felt he could refine and define what it meant to be a professional Soldier.

"Mentoring, training and taking care of Soldiers is an NCO's currency," said Capel about what makes the noncommissioned officer a unique asset in the U.S. Army. "Officers value our experience and trust in our abilities."

Following two tours leading U.S. and coalition forces in Afghanistan as the Regional Command-East senior enlisted advisor, Capel served as the U.S. Army Europe command sergeant major.

In addition to advising the commander and improving readiness and quality of life for Soldiers in Europe, Capel focused on liaising with partnered nations and promoting the value of the noncommissioned officer corps. While there, Capel organized the Conference of European Armies for Noncommissioned Officers. Leaders from more than 40 countries participated.

"Most, if not all, future conflicts are going to be either joint or partnered, and establishing and maintaining those relationships with our counterparts in other armies and even among our own sister services is essential to maintaining readiness," Capel said.

In January 2012, Capel received a call from Marine Corps Gen. John Allen, the International Security and Assistance Force commander. Allen asked him if he'd be willing to deploy to Afghanistan and serve as the ISAF command sergeant major.

During his time as the ISAF senior enlisted advisor, Capel led service members from more than 50 countries in the efforts to promote the Afghan National Security Forces, defeat the enemies of Afghanistan and ensure security for the Afghan people.

He developed a unique personal relationship with many of the senior Afghan leaders to include the sergeant major of the Afghan National Army, Sgt. Maj. Roshan Safi.

“Command Sgt. Maj. Capel is one of my closest friends and a friend to all Afghanistan,” Safi said. “He is famous here; everyone knows and loves the sergeant major.”

Together, Capel and Safi championed one another’s cause to create a more professional ANA noncommissioned officer corps and foster relations between the coalition troops and the ANA soldiers.

Capel left Afghanistan confident in the progress and capabilities of the ANSF.

“The ANSF is more than 360,000 strong and is growing and developing into a professional force,” Capel said. “I have every confidence that patriotic force is capable of protecting the Afghan people for long into the future.”

Why did you decide to join the Army and why did you continue to serve for more than 30 Years?

It was pretty simple why I joined. I was working in the fields around my hometown of Ellerbe, N.C., doing some pretty tough labor, and I saw the Army as a chance

to better my life and get new experiences. I stayed in the Army for more than 36 years because I loved to train and mentor Soldiers. I loved seeing young Soldiers develop into leaders and own what it means to be a noncommissioned officer.

What role have NCOs played in your career?

NCOs have played a very important role in my career. The noncommissioned officer is the trainer, the councilor and the disciplinarian. They maintain the operational readiness and keep their Soldiers up to par physically and mentally, and ready to go to war anytime they’re called upon.

Although you are retiring, what would you like to see from the NCO Corps in the future?

I think we’ve come a long way in the NCO Corps, and it’s still getting better every day. We already have the best noncommissioned officer corps in the world. But we cannot afford to just lay back and rest on our past performance. We have to continue to look into the future and make our corps stronger. We need to remember the past, but live and train to fight and win on the battlefield



Command Sgt. Maj. Thomas Capel, International Security Assistance Force and U.S. Forces – Afghanistan senior enlisted leader, awards a U.S. non-commissioned officer with a leadership coin at Forward Operating Base Warrior, Ghazni province, Afghanistan, May 29, 2013. Capel recognizes troops for excellent performance while executing their missions(DoD photo).

of tomorrow. We have to continue to develop the best leaders to take over when our time is up.

How much did the role of the NCO change from pre-9/11 to post-9/11?

Our noncommissioned officers have been at war for the past 13 years, and we've been focused on training our Soldiers to fight, win, survive and return back home to their families. That being said, we have some things we need to go back and refocus on, such as discipline, counseling, and garrison operations and procedures. NCOs pre-9/11 were raised in the garrison environment and now, we have so many great NCOs raised during wartime. They've proven themselves as leaders in combat and now we owe it to them to help them learn how to be good leaders in garrison. We need to teach them how to deal with things like suicides, sexual harassments, assaults, hazing and adjusting back to family life. We need to focus on the NCOs' role in combating these issues and teaching and leading Soldiers in the right direction for the future.

What makes a good NCO?

For me, it's plain old discipline. Ninety-nine percent of the time, people know when they're doing right or wrong before they even do it. It boils down to self-discipline and being able to know if actions or behaviors will embarrass myself, my family, my organization or the United States Army. The quality of the good non-commissioned officer is built up from character, loyalty and discipline, and it is rooted in the Warrior Ethos and Army Values we rely on to guide our decisions. When your Soldier see you living those values they will follow you anywhere. They recognize what kind of character you have, what kind of person you are, and they know and respect what you live by.

How did you set the example?

I set the example every day. I'm not about to say that I was perfect, no one is—at least none who I've ever seen. But, I do know when I'm doing things wrong or when I see things that aren't right. I wouldn't tolerate it. I had no problem making on-the-spot corrections and setting the proper example for my Soldiers. I'm not going to preach safety standards and then go out there and violate them by drinking and driving or using illegal drugs. Our Soldiers see that in their leaders, and they know if those leaders are practicing what they preach. Leaders cannot afford to lose their Soldiers' trust and respect.

What changes would you like to see Army wide?

When you want to talk Army wide, that's a big broad subject, the Army is very large and encompasses many people and units to include our brothers and sisters in

the National Guard and Army Reserve. I'd like to see each unit focus on their own challenges as they try to meet the larger Army goals and objectives, to include readiness, resiliency, family and taking care of our veterans. We don't know when we'll be called to fight again; we're still involved in Afghanistan and not off that battlefield yet. We need to continue to focus on taking care of our guys and girls that are still in harm's way, and getting them home safely to their families.

What advice do you have for junior NCOs?

You look at the road ahead of you, and it appears long. But, I'm telling you it's not that long. I woke up one morning, and I'm raising my hand to join the United States Army. Then I opened my eyes up, and I'm standing on the retirement stage with 36 years' time in service. Those young NCOs are the future—our future senior NCOs, first sergeants and sergeants major. I'd ask them to strive to be the best they can be in their current positions, because the young Soldiers you lead expect to get the best possible training to make sure you are capable of getting them home alive. Don't ever take shortcuts, because your Soldiers and their families are counting on you.

What advice do you have for senior NCOs to include new command sergeants major?

Senior NCOs need to do everything to show their units that they are the right leaders to take their organizations forward. That means you need to sit down and talk with your Soldiers, talk to your leaders, talk to your boss, and make sure you understand how you can use those people to take care of Soldiers and contribute to mission accomplishment and, ultimately, unit success. You need to prepare those NCOs below you to take over. You may not be promoted anymore, but there are other opportunities like those division, corps and major command positions available. They expect you to know what you're talking about and know what you're doing. You need to have proved you can manage Soldiers and organizations successfully.

What is good leadership?

What makes me so proud is when I've gone and visited those units, those companies and platoons out there on the battlefield. Some Soldier I may be having breakfast with says, "I have a really good sergeant major. I have a really good first sergeant. I have a really good platoon sergeant or squad leader." That means the world to me. That means that somewhere in that chain of responsibility, good things are happening and they're doing right by their Soldier. Those young Soldiers will probably do the same thing I did, and re-enlist to become great leaders themselves. I couldn't wait to find my

re-enlistment guy or girl so I could raise my right hand and reenlist again. That's what good leadership brings. I think we're displaying that around the Army today. I think we're doing a great job ensuring that we keep the best noncommissioned officers in our service to continue to do what they need to do to train our guys and girls to fight, win and survive.

What impact have you seen NCOs make on Soldiers?

It'd be negligent to underestimate the impact NCOs have on their Soldiers. They rely on their NCO to look

after them, train them and return them home safe to their families. NCOs are the backbone of the Army, and without a strong corps, we would find the organization we love struggling to meet the needs of our great nation. Conflicts are won and lost based on the strength and resilience of the Soldier. The quality of the Soldier is any army's best asset, and the power of the United States Army comes from its ability to train and lead those fine men and women who volunteer to serve. ■

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contributed to this report**



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