



Staff Sgt. Frank Thayer earned the Bronze Star with “V” device in May 2008 while serving in Logar Province, Afghanistan. (Photo courtesy Staff Sgt. Frank Thayer)

By Example: Trust in Leadership Helps When Battle Begins

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This story is part of a periodic NCO Journal feature that takes a closer look at an Army award in an NCO’s career. This month, we focus on the career of an NCO who was awarded the Bronze Star with “V” device. The Bronze Star may be awarded for bravery, acts of merit or meritorious service. The “V” device denotes individuals who were awarded a decoration in recognition of valorous acts performed during direct combat with an enemy force.

Today, Staff Sgt. Frank Thayer is a platoon sergeant in the 472nd Military Police Company at Fort Wainwright, Alaska. But in May 2008, in Logar Province, Afghanistan, he was still a month away from being promoted from specialist to sergeant when he earned the Bronze Star with “V” device for his valorous actions under fire.

“I was responding to a QRF (Quick Reaction Force), basically a distress call,” Thayer said. “We were going toward the unit that was needing help. As we got to a little village, all the lights were off, which is kind of a telltale sign. I keyed the mic up and said, ‘Hey guys, be aware.’ As soon as I unkeyed the mic, I looked over and one of the Taliban had an RPG (rocket-propelled grenade) pinged at my door.”

Despite being injured in his right leg, Thayer was able to get out of the vehicle and return fire.

“I looked at my buddy, and I said, ‘I’m not dying on this road! I’m not dying in Afghanistan,’” Thayer told WSPA-TV.

The ambush included about 25 people, Thayer said. He was able to kill two insurgents and hold off others as the crew returned to base without suffering any fatalities.

How do the actions you took that day represent the best of the U.S. Army?

It all goes back to one of our main goals over there ... I got promoted to E-5 over there, and six months later, I was promoted to E-6. When I left there, I swore to myself that my main goal was to make sure my Soldiers — my squad, my platoon, everybody — came back. I think it all came down to the battle drills that we do in the Army over, and over and over. A lot of the guys in our squad were new and had never seen any type of combat. This was my fourth deployment. They reacted well. I was proud of them. This attack was in the first three weeks. It was a telltale sign of how this yearlong deployment was going to go. As far as the Army, what they instill in us to lead, to take care of each other — all of that tied into our actions that day.

What do you hope your Soldiers and junior NCOs learn from your actions that day?

All plans go out the window when first contact happens, but trust in your training and trust in your leadership. Some people get caught up in not making the decision, but luckily the Soldiers made all the right decisions [that day]. Trust in your leadership; trust in your equipment. We all train on not getting complacent. All that training helps your reaction when the time comes.

Why did you decide to join the Army, and why have you continued to serve?

I'm an Army brat and hadn't decided to join. I grew up in it. I was born at Fort Jackson, S.C. I was going to college. My parents, especially my mom, told me I was a career college student. I didn't join until I was 24. My mom passed away in 2000, and that's when I joined. I don't know if I was running from something, or deep down in my soul I knew I was going to go into the Army. I just couldn't face the facts. But I think it was the right decision. I've enjoyed it. The camaraderie is great. Every deployment I've been on, I've volunteered for, except for one that just fell into place. I always think of the guys to the left and the right of me, because that's what it's about. It's about each other. The main reason I stay in is the Soldiers I enjoy being around.

I like to show them how to do things, and having them teach me. You can learn something new from a private, just as you can from the Sergeant Major of the Army.

What makes a good NCO?

Pressing yourself first. You can tell somebody to do something all day long. My family goes back to West Point. My great-grandfather was at West Point. My dad served 29 years. My brother is still in. And I've always been raised that you have to make people want to work for you. If you can encourage your troops, lead by example, then give them a reason to work for you, it makes your life easier. And you help those Soldiers succeed and pass that down. That private you have may one day be the Sergeant Major of the Army, or he may be a sergeant major in charge of his unit. If you show them the right way, and leave them to have to make some decisions, I think that's the way to help them.

What role did NCOs play in your development as you came up in the Army?

By doing a lot of what I just mentioned. [Retired] Command Sgt. Maj. Charles Guyette was my sergeant major. I think he's at USASMA now. (Editor's note: Guyette is currently director of the Directorate of Training at the U.S. Army Sergeants Major Academy at Fort Bliss, Texas.) I had him as one of my biggest mentors. We went to Iraq and back together and went through a lot of firefights together. He and Gen. Phillips, our brigade commander, said, "The only thing that makes us different from you all is that we came in years before." They showed me right and wrong.

What advice would you give to junior NCOs?

Take care of your Soldiers, that's the main thing. Take what you can learn from your senior NCOs, the other ones around you. But taking care of Soldiers is what it's about, because that's where it's going to fall down to. The Soldiers and NCOs are the backbone of the Army, but the Soldiers are the ones who make things happen. They can either make you look outstanding, or they can make you look like the worst person in the world. ■



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