



Marine Corps Sgt. Maj. Bryan Battaglia, the senior enlisted adviser to the chairman of the Joints Chief of Staff, speaks to a room of deployed troops at Bagram Air Field, Afghanistan, on March 15, 2014. (Photo by Master Sgt. Kap Kim)

# From the Field: Are We Really Ever Off Duty?

By Marine Corps Sgt. Maj. Bryan B. Battaglia

Senior Enlisted Advisor to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff

**A**s we in the U.S. military continue to renew our commitment to the profession of arms, the headline of this article asks a compelling question for everyone who wears the cloth of the nation. Though I believe the question has an easy answer, let us not downplay the significance of asking it at *every* level of professional development.

Most serving in the armed forces understand the deeper meaning of the question, as well as the commitment to the profession and the American people that go along with it. Therefore, most military professionals would provide the short answer: “No, we are never really off duty.”

Indeed, we are a more effective and a more disciplined force when we live by the high standard of *always on duty* or *never off duty* — you choose and use the term that best resonates with you. I prefer the latter as it conveys a more

subtle and steady narrative that is less prone to technical interpretations. To others, the short answer of *no* may not process as quickly. My hope for that particular audience is that by the end of this article, the meaning of the question and resulting answer shall provide a better understanding of why it is, individually and organizationally, advantageous for us all to live by such a standard of ethical, moral and professional behavior. Maintaining a *never off duty* posture is not a new idea or the result of a recent study. It has been and should always remain an integral part of our total composition as members of the profession.

A disciplined, dedicated and structured military career embodies certain individual traits and attributes, such as professional behavior, integrity, respect and bearing, which collectively provide an internal beacon to guide us. However, living by such a high military standard does not mean we

have to sacrifice every aspect of an otherwise normal life, such as obligations to family, exercising appropriate periods of rest and so forth. But it *does* mean that, regardless of time or circumstance, we are always fulfilling our obligations as professionals, whether during or after working hours.

To be human is to be imperfect, and it is safe to say that none of us is consistently flawless in meeting a pre-eminent standard such as *never off duty*. We all face temptation and periods in our careers and personal lives where we may be drawn to convenience, greediness, even luxury, resulting in shortfalls. It is an *individual* decision to take the right or wrong road. When wrongful temptation overrides service members' decisions (the wrong road), our integrity should be immediately challenged by our better selves, our teammates, our profession and even our nation's citizens. Depending on the severity of the decision made, significant setbacks can result for the profession, including degradation in faith and confidence with the public, injury and even loss of life. This is where those who act less than honorably tarnish and scar the reputation of our profession of arms. Maintaining a conviction of *never off duty* instills a disciplined standard of living and will help guide decisions that may help avoid poor planning or bad decisions.

By virtue of qualifying to join the Armed Forces, I strongly consider those achieving the title of Soldier, Marine, sailor, airman or Coast Guardsman to have reached a high watermark in their lives. The profession benefits greatly from the diversity, skills and determination toward excellence our service members bring. *We all* want not only to be good in our service, but also great in our duty.

The majority in our formations do it right. They challenge themselves to live by the moral and professional standard of *never off duty*. And most believe if this standard is not carried to its fullest, individuals and teams can break down in discipline, morals and ethics, thereby drawing discredit, failure or embarrassment to one's unit, branch of service, country, family and self. A true serving professional understands the severity of that breakdown and will exhaust every effort to avoid it. Furthermore, I find that service members who truly understand *never off duty* become exceptional role models and mentors to all others.

At various points along our military career and glide path, maybe even as early as basic training, some key legacy phrases may help as reminders of why one is *never off duty*: "You get paid 24 hours a day," "You can be recalled at any time" and the one I think resonates best, "Don't think the rules stop or the standards drop at 1700 just because it's the end of the work day; there is no time card to punch." Each phrase conveys that when we volunteer to serve the nation, it is a 24/7 obligation, and our obligations and responsibilities as members of the profession of arms never expire.

All five service branches have unique cultures and identities, and as such, they define, understand and implement *never off duty* in different ways that ensure members achieve and maintain standards. But regardless of service branch, duty assignment, geographical location or military occupational specialty, there are commonalities and consistencies for maintaining professional behavior, ethics and proper representation of the nation. Operating in a mindset of *never off duty* in our everyday lives should prove professionally lucrative. Allowing this operating principle into our professional lives will raise our ability to sidestep temptation and poor personal actions or choices.

Regardless of one's military status — whether taking annual leave or liberty, attending school, appearing at a social function, serving an internship, moonlighting in an after-hours job, shopping for groceries or conducting combat actions against an enemy force — *never off duty* provides that disciplined methodology to our military lives. It is a behavior rooted in moral soundness and high values, with cause and effect. It maintains a standard and positively impacts professional focus and conduct. It is reachable and sustainable for everyone, every day, every time. We are a much better organization with it than without it. We are *never off duty*. ■

*Marine Corps Sgt. Maj. Bryan B. Battaglia is the second senior enlisted advisor to the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and is the senior noncommissioned officer in the U.S. armed forces. This article originally appeared in issue 73 of [Joint Force Quarterly](#).*

---



<https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/NCO-Journal/>

<https://www.facebook.com/NCOJournal>

<https://twitter.com/NCOJournal>

**Disclaimer:** The views expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the NCO Journal, the U.S. Army, or the Department of Defense.

