



Staff Sgt. Paul Willey, an instructor at the Army's Northern Warfare Training Center in Alaska, inspects a student's equipment during the Basic Mountaineering Course. (U.S. Army photo by Staff Sgt. Brehl Garza)

Inspiring Leadership

Sgt. Maj. Michael M. Brosch II — U.S. Army Sergeants Major Academy

A Soldier can spend his or her entire military career without ever finding that one mentor whose leadership style is both inspirational and motivating. Yet those who've had the good fortune to work under these inspiring leaders often attribute their success to their transformational leaders.

I have experienced this unique opportunity on many occasions throughout my 20-plus years of military service as an infantryman. These leaders are particularly easy to pick out of crowd with their dominating presence and charisma, which is felt immediately upon arriving to a unit. Though some units are cluttered with substandard Soldiers, mediocre noncommissioned officers and junior—and sometimes senior officers—whose toxic presence destroys morale and cohesion, I have seen inspiring leaders immediately recognize these deficiencies and, at once, create a positive, cohesive atmosphere. They motivate Soldiers, prepare them for combat and ultimately enhance a command climate that fosters camaraderie. Not only do they leave a lasting impression on Soldiers, their leadership affects countless officers and NCOs for many years. Since my first encounter with this type of inspiring leader, I have tried to hone my leadership style, in order to mirror their continuous success.

My first encounter with a true, caring mentor was during a unit awards ceremony in 2002 during my first tour in Germany. I was young a staff sergeant at the time; I had not deployed and had never heard the whiz or crack of enemy bullets in combat. I remember feeling disdain about attending an awards ceremony on a Friday afternoon, for someone I did not even know. Standing side-by-side with my fellow NCOs and Soldiers, the buzz about why we were there was lingering in the humid, mid-afternoon air.

As the ceremony began, I caught my first glimpse of a sergeant major as he walked to the front of the formation when his name was called. He looked all the part of a seasoned combat veteran. His uniform featured the Combat Infantryman Badge with a star affixed atop the wreath, 1st Ranger Battalion combat scroll and the coveted Bronze Service Star, “mustard” stain on his Jumpmaster wings. With eyes slightly closed and squinting in the full sun, his swaggering walk of confidence carried him to the front of the battalion formation. He was being awarded the Bronze Star Medal for his actions as a company first sergeant in Afghanistan.

Until this point, only a small handful of Soldiers in the formation had deployed— most during the Gulf War—and combat awards were merely a thing we read

about in history books. But here, standing in front of the formation, was the battalion commander speaking of this sergeant major as a true warrior. His words about the sergeant major's actions in combat, which earned him the Bronze Star, fell on anxious, curious ears: "For displaying outstanding courage and exemplary leadership during ground combat operations against a determined enemy force in the Afghanistan area of operation."

Humbly, Sgt. Maj. Darrin Bohn, expressed that it was not his actions that earned him this award, but the actions of his men in A Company, 1st Ranger Battalion, while he was the first sergeant. He was a true warrior who had seen the deadly arena of war, and it became very clear to me on that day that I had found one of my mentors.

In 2001, the Army announced the consolidation of the light and mechanized infantrymen military occupational specialties. The Army identified that it needed a more flexible infantryman, the Army chief of staff, Gen. Eric Shinseki, announced, and it was in place by July 2001.

Affected by this transformation, Bohn, who was new to mechanized infantry, was assigned to the 2nd Battalion, 2nd Infantry Regiment, at Vilseck, Germany in the summer of 2002 as the battalion operations (S-3) sergeant major.

In that position, Bohn became obsessed with the technical and tactical aspects of mechanized infantry and was constantly picking the brain of the battalion master gunner. Bohn was well aware that the superior technology and firepower able to be unleashed by the Bradley Fighting Vehicle, BFV, against an enemy force would no doubt determine the outcome of any battle. As luck would have it, there were two battalion master gunners (normally a battalion only has one) serving in the operations section, Staff Sgt. Ray Zumwalt and me.

Zumwalt, the more senior master gunner, was transitioning out of the operations shop, and I was stepping in to fill his shoes for the next 18 months. Zumwalt and I would spend countless hours answering questions thrown at us by Bohn about the logistical, technical and tactical aspects of the BFV and the training associated with the mechanized concept. He was determined to know everything about the BFV, and it would take both Zumwalt and I to fuel his curiosity.

In the countless hours we spent together, we developed an inspiring sense of camaraderie, and there were many occasions that helped break through the mechanized-light infantry barrier. Zumwalt and I soon realized that Bohn was a down-to-earth leader. His sheer presence commanded respect, and his devotion to learning the concept of mechanized infantry was entirely wrapped in his commitment to take care of Soldiers, which he said came from what his team, squad and platoon had instilled in him as an NCO—the good qualities of a successful leader.

I remember thinking, "What a great concept, learning from your subordinates."

After these and many other encounters with Bohn, I committed myself to incorporating his leadership competencies and characteristics into my own style as I continued my career.

During the next few months, I found myself scribbling notes about Bohn's leadership style in one of those typical, green Army notebooks. I continued to write in this book and, years later, would go back and read some of the things that I had written. Most of my notes were anecdotes and lessons that I used again and again during the next 10 years.

One that sticks out is something that Bohn said to me once when I showed up late to a command and staff briefing. Carefully opening the door to the brief, I tried not to call attention to myself and found my seat. This, of course, was impossible as Bohn immediately called me out in front of the entire battalion staff.

"Brosch, come on in, have a seat. There's not always room for someone at the table, but if you get here on time I bet you can find one," he said.

His tone was a bit more than sarcastic, and I felt uneasy for the better part of an hour waiting for the meeting to end. He approached me afterward and used my lateness as a learning experience; but I did not realize it at the time. The entire conversation took less than three minutes, and I remember walking away needing to write something in my green book to reference later. The only three words I could remember were, "stupid, coach and mistake."

Later I recalled what he had actually said: "You can't coach stupid" and "never make the same mistake twice." Even inside a good ol' fashioned butt chewing, I was able to pull away with something good to add to my little green book.

Caring For and Training Soldiers

As the end of the summer of 2003 was drew near, our unit received orders to deploy to Iraq in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom. An intense training plan was immediately set in motion, and the men were eager to get into the fight with the rest of the Army. Bohn was a constant presence during the intense pre-war train up.

Exercising his expertise in light infantry, he spearheaded multiple training events from demolition training to close-quarters marksmanship. Much of the expertise he brought to the training would pay huge dividends for the unit during The Battle for Fallujah later that year. It was clear during the entire preparation phase that he was fanatical about ensuring all Soldiers received quality, realistic training. A few years after Fallujah, Bohn was interviewed for an oral history and asked about the unit's training plan prior to deploying to Iraq:

“Those guys [Soldiers] just need good leadership. No one wants to go to work and be a dirtbag and fail at what they’re doing—and with good leadership and guidance, those guys shined. Lt. Col. Newell and I—and Command Sgt. Maj. Faulkenburg in the beginning—really put a good comprehensive plan together before we left for Iraq. We knew it was going to be a ground fight, we knew there was going to be a lot of room clearing, and we knew the man with the rifle was going to win the battle, so we did a lot of close-quarters battle and close-quarters marksmanship. With my background, I even ran a leadership program through the Soldiers in the brigade that came to Vilseck. We ran them through a quick two-day [close-quarters battle] and [close-quarters marksmanship] to get the other two or three battalions up to snuff where we were. I still have guys coming up to me and saying they thought it was horse s— that they had to go through the courses in Vilseck but, that said, they wanted me to know it also saved their lives and other Soldiers’ lives as well.”

Courage

During the Battle for Fallujah, on Nov. 11, 2004, Command Sgt. Maj. Steven Faulkenburg, our battalion command sergeant major, was killed by small-arms fire in the breach phase of the operation. Immediately and without hesitation, Bohn assumed the role as battalion command sergeant major. Positioned with the maneuver element of the task force in the heavy forward tactical operations center and commanding a BFV, he took time when there were lulls in fighting to visit the Soldiers of the battalion to instill confidence and inspire them to continue to fight. A few hours into the battle, one of the company executive officers was fatally wounded; his vehicle was pinned down and unable to conduct a casualty evacuation. Bohn, with a complete disregard for his own safety, positioned his BFV in between the wounded XO’s vehicle and the enemy rocket-propelled grenade and small arms fire to provide suppressive, accurate fire to facilitate the XO’s evacuation. These actions earned Bohn the Bronze Star Medal with “V” device for Valor.

Robert Harvey states in his book, *Maverick Military Leaders: The Extraordinary Battles of Washington, Nelson, Patton, Rommel and Others*, “Leaders who appreciate the importance of their men and morale in turn will be entrusted by their men and will be followed to the ends of the earth or, more importantly, to the ends of their lives, if necessary.”

This was apparent throughout Bohn’s tenure as the senior enlisted NCO in charge of training the battalion. Granted, Bohn is not a commissioned officer like those referenced in Harvey’s book and he would scoff at the idea of being compared with the likes of Patton, Rommel and so many other “mavericks” listed by Harvey.

Perhaps a look at what some of the Army’s most

senior leaders say about Bohn will shed some light onto his inspiration and leadership. When asked about this his leadership, the U.S. Africa Command commander, Gen. David M. Rodriguez said in 2013:

“He has a feel for people and interpersonal skills that enable him to engage with people in a way that inspires them to do more than they ever thought possible. The ability to lift people up gives them the enthusiasm to make a difference in the mission, no matter how hard it seems. He is one of those leaders who treats people with dignity and respect, and builds relationships effectively with our joint, interagency and multinational partners. The resulting teamwork is one of the strengths he brings to any organization. He has the intellectual gift to listen intently, analyze the situation and get to the heart of the problem. He makes these recommendations and judgments with consideration of the strategic context, all the way down to the individual context, always thinking through the second and third order effects.”

Over the last 12 years, for me it has been an illuminating experience to have served with such a great mentor as Bohn. He truly internalizes his beliefs, the Army Values and, above all, cares for and brings out the best in Soldiers. Some argue whether or not leaders are born or made. While I personally think this is a polar argument, Gen. Colin Powell said in 2005 during an interview, “Effective leaders are made, not born. They learn from trial and error and from the experience and puts it behind them.”

A statement Bohn has said reminds me of Powell’s: “Never make the same mistake twice.”

Born or made, a leader must come from the sort of background that fosters a strong character with morals and beliefs that define that. I have seen my fair share of both great leaders and extremely toxic ones. The leader who cares and who can bring out the best in their subordinates is the one who will be successful and never be forgotten.

Being taught to always be self-aware, adaptive and, most importantly, reflective on who I was and where I came from has no doubt been a contributing factor to my success in the Army.

Bohn’s success can be summed up in saying that he never forgot where he came from. He was not born a command sergeant major, and he knew that. He started at the very bottom of the military ranks and rose to one of the highest enlisted ranks (and positions) in the Army by always being forthcoming, deeply caring for his subordinates, embodying the Warrior Ethos, and exercising the core leadership competencies outlined in FM 6-22, *Army Leadership*.

Sgt. Maj. Bohn is now Command Sgt. Maj. Bohn and is serving as the AFRICOM’s senior enlisted leader. His transformational, inspiring leadership has been the cornerstone of my leadership style since the day I first

met him. I have since served through two other combat tours to Iraq and Afghanistan and never lost a Soldier. I contribute my accomplishments and success to Bohn's inspiring leadership and mentoring.

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leader to first sergeant. His previous assignments include Fort Bragg, N.C., Vilseck, Germany, Fort Benning, Ga., Ft. Hood, Texas and Korea. His previous duty assignment was the Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 525th Battle Field Surveillance Brigade first sergeant at Fort Bragg. In his 21-year career as an infantryman, he has deployed twice to Iraq and once to Afghanistan. ■



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