His Name Was Bourdo

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(U.S. Army graphic by Arias)

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His name was Bourdo – Sgt. Hank Bourdo. And like the rest of us that Oregon summer, he was there for an intensive two week course designed to turn untried, junior NCOs into full-fledged leaders. But it was Bourdo who taught us more about caring for and inspiring soldiers than we ever could have learned from a book.

He was older than most of us and he wore his chevrons with an easy confidence. He knew all of our names long before the rhythm of repeated roll-calls had lodged in the flat back of our brains, and sometimes he could startle with his recall - laying out a piece of personal histozy you had discarded in casual conversation the day before. He joked, and he laughed, and he listened.

We reported to Camp Rilea on the northern coast of Oregon that brilliant Saturday morning. Several hundred of us lined up on the gravel parking lot, dressed in our greens and struggling with over-stuffed duffel bags. We were inspected, weighed, registered and assigned to one of a row of white-washed, green-trimmed buildings, our home for the next 14 days.

Our day began at 5:45 a.m. when the calloused hand of some humorless master sergeant flipped a switch and a blaze of light burned through our unconsciousness. We had only minutes to wash, grab a T-shirt and shorts and report to the PT grounds. "Fall in," the instructor bellowed, and for the next 20 minutes he led us as we worked and sweated.

Within 48 hours we had taken over the task ourselves and were dutifully responding to the hesitant orders of whomever was assigned as squad leader for the day. Our lessons in leadership had begun.

One morning, early that first week, we assembled to find ourselves facing Bourdo. Today, the regimen would be different, he announced. He wanted us to think about the reasons for this exercise routine. Physical training was only a small part of why we were there. What the Army was really trying to do, he told us, was to teach us to teach other soldiers.

Instead of trying to out-do ourselves each morning with a regimen that left us tired and stiff, Bourdo had another idea. He focused on skill building. That was an NCO's real job, he said, and the best way to do that was to practice the art of giving commands. That morning, we performed a series of exercises, each of which would require giving a specific set of orders to move us into the proper position.

Classroom instruction took up most of our days at the camp, and when the time came fora test which would make or break us, the instructor moved aside and Bourdo took the floor.

As a human resources instructor at the Boeing Co., Bourdo had experience in teaching and testing. Now he took us in hand to prepare for the exam. "Nothing to worry about," he told us. "Taking a test is easy if you remember a few key points," and he proceeded to lay them out.

Toward the end of that day, it was clear that one young man just wasn't getting it. He had trouble figuring out which points in a lesson were key and which were not. For hours, Bourdo worked with him.

As we stood outside the classroom during a break, we could hear Bourdo, still inside, one-on-one, pressing and cajoling his anxious student. "We started together," he said, "and we're gonna finish together. You can do this. I know you can." That was his personal theme, his philosophy: We're professionals, we can do this, and we can do it together. It's a philosophy he taught us by example; we embraced it wholeheartedly.

The trepidation we had about the test was nothing compared to the concern we felt about the upcoming field exercise.

We knew we would face a grueling three days, but as always, Bourdo gave us encouragement. After class on the afternoon before heading out to the field, Bourdo gathered us for a pep talk.

"We've got a lot of experience here," he told us, pointing out members of our group who had seen service in Vietnam or who had specialized combat training. "These are the people we should rely on. If you need help, we'll be there," he said. Then he suggested that those less experienced team with those who knew the ropes. The buddy system. "You're professionals," he told us again. "You'll come through with flying colors."

The exercise was all it was billed to be - tough and taxing. We marched for hours through silt and sand in full kit, two by two, until, calves aching, we reached our objective under a strand of tall pines. Exhausted, we dropped our gear and prepared our positions for the night. I was completing my tasks when I glanced up and saw Bourdo stringing empty cans on a wire around our perimeter. "An early warning system," he explained. A low-tech DEW line. Our instructors hadn't mentioned anything about OPFOR, but Bourdo wasn't taking any chances.

That night, as we sat doing hip-pocket training, Bourdo told us how to rig an audible trip wire. He pointed out the weak spots in our defenses where an enemy could mount an assault under cover of darkness, and he urged us to be alert.

The next day, one of our tasks was to cross an open field to reach a grove of trees on the other side. We were concealed on a small rise, the objective visible ahead. It was time to talk tactics and training. Each person was assigned a topic to teach – a lesson directly related to getting us safely to our next objective. We each took a turn as instructor, but when it came time for our prior-service Marine to teach the group, he froze. He would rather have crossed a mine field than to speak in front of an audience.

Bourdo immediately came to the rescue. "We're not some group of strangers," he told the soldier. "We're your friends and this is important information we need. You can do it." Then Bourdo began to question him, slowly drawing the information out. The soldier's words came haltingly at first. Gently, as Bourdo prodded him, the soldier grew confident. By the end of the lesson, the ex-Marine had won our applause, and Bourdo, with his care and concern, had once again won our admiration.

The three-day exercise was a challenge, but when it was over we had gained immeasurably in skill and confidence. We were tired and dirty that final afternoon, but we laughed and joked with each other as we stood cleaning our weapons. Bourdo was helping a small group of us who had failed the armorer's inspection. He carefully explained the assembly and disassembly of our rifles as we struggled to mimic the ease with which he did each task. Again and again, he made us put the weapons together and take them apart until we could do the job, if not with grace, at least with speed.

The next afternoon, brass gleaming and leather shining, we fell in on the parade ground for the final formation. It was a formal ceremony with a pass-in-review. I was never so proud of my accomplishments in the service as I was that day. Our platoon didn't win any awards; we weren't first in any of the specific categories. But, in my opinion, we were the most successful of any of the graduates. We had learned first-hand that the real job of an NCO is to care about the soldiers he leads, and we saw, through the example of Bourdo, the powerful and lasting impact one man can have on the spirit of a unit.