

Hard Lessons for New Sergeants

By **COMMAND SGT. MAJ. Daniel Hendrex**, Special to the NCO Journal

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Then-Sgt. 1st Class William Tomlin is awarded the Silver Star by President George W. Bush at Fort Bragg, N.C., on May 22, 2008. Tomlin led several counterattacks against an enemy force that outnumbered his platoon six-to-one in Helmand Province, Afghanistan. (Photo by Sgt. Timothy Dinneen)

When given the opportunity, how do you relay a lifetime of experiences to young NCOs? What would be important for them to know today? What would be important to know at the end of their careers?

I recently had the opportunity to discuss those experiences with the 10th Mountain Division, NCO Academy Basic Leader Course graduating Class 04-16 at Fort Drum, New York. Whether it's a BLC Graduation, an NCO induction ceremony or opening a Leadership Professional Development session, how do you convey these lessons in such a condensed time period?

A few years ago, I had the opportunity to answer this through a series of discussions with five highly successful NCOs, both active-duty and retired, that I had the honor of working with. Though their backgrounds and experiences differed significantly, I discovered a common theme that was woven throughout their experiences and was the single most important factor in their quality leadership: building trust.

The events these senior NCOs have been through cover a vast and impressive period. Those experiences include Special Operations, inspiring a history of family service, deployments in the desert and covert missions closer to home. Whether earning awards through their solitary actions or leading a team under arduous conditions, these Soldiers all became senior noncommissioned officers and achieved an almost unprecedented level of success during their careers in the U.S. Army. Before I share their words with you, context is extremely important. I would like to tell you briefly about these five Soldiers and why I think they are worth listening to.

Sgt. Maj. William Tomlin III grew up in a suburban Connecticut neighborhood. The infantry called to him, and he never looked back. While in Helmand Province in Afghanistan in early April 2007, then-Sgt. 1st Class Tomlin was the acting platoon leader for his scout platoon. After three straight days of fighting, 300 Taliban attacked his 45-man element. The six-hour enemy attack reached within 15 meters of their location and continued to press forward. Tomlin consolidated their remaining ammunition, and his persistence and leadership during their counterattack turned the tide of the battle. He was awarded the Silver Star.

Then- Sgt. 1st Class William Tomlin is awarded the Silver Star by President George W. Bush May 22, 2008, at Fort Bragg, N.C. Tomlin led several counterattacks against an enemy force that outnumbered his platoon six-to-one in Helmand Province, Afghanistan. (Photo by Sgt. Timothy Dinneen)fl Then-Sgt. 1st Class William Tomlin is awarded the Silver Star by President George W. Bush at Fort Bragg, N.C., on May 22, 2008. Tomlin led several counterattacks against an enemy force that outnumbered his platoon six-to-one in Helmand Province, Afghanistan.

(Photo by Sgt. Timothy Dinneen)

Command Sgt. Maj. Mike Cortes, known as “Pup,” was a member of a Special Operations unit. He became part of history as a member of the first High Altitude Low Opening team to jump into Afghanistan to support the Northern Alliance. In June 2003, he was sent on a mission to find two missing Soldiers in Iraq. Then-Sgt. 1st Class Cortes drove upon an enemy force preparing an ambush site. His two-man team, heavily outnumbered, engaged the enemy element at close range, their nontactical vehicle being disabled by enemy fire. Ignoring his wounds, Cortes continued to engage, killing several enemy fighters and forcing the remainder to retreat. His efforts not only prevented the enemy fighters from killing his element, but also reduced their ability to conduct future ambushes. He was awarded the Silver Star for his actions.

Sgt. Maj. Brendan O’Conner was 7 years old when his father was killed in the Vietnam War. Raised in a family with a deep history of military service and surrounded by the valorous actions of his forefathers, he chose to follow in their footsteps and earned an officer’s commission from the Valley Forge Military Academy. In 1994, he resigned his commission and enlisted as a Special Forces medical sergeant. In June 2006, O’Conner’s team was in southern Afghanistan, where it was ambushed by 250 Taliban fighters. During 17.5 hours of intense battle, two of his team members were severely injured and his team leader was killed. He took command of the team. Eventually, he and his Soldiers killed 120 Taliban fighters before withdrawing under the protection of air support. O’Conner was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross.

Sgt. Maj. Tony Pryor, a Special Forces team sergeant, was a good-old boy from rural Oregon. Thick-necked, with hamhocks for hands and the strength of a silverback gorilla, he was often referred to as “Bucket.” While in Afghanistan on a late evening in January 2002, he and his team were clearing al-Qaida and Taliban forces from a compound and conducting site exploitation. In the darkness and the heat of the battle, Pryor was separated from his team and found himself clearing rooms alone. Soon after getting separated, he encountered a charging enemy and eliminated the threat. In the next room, he came upon an additional three fighters. In the melee, a fourth struck him from behind with a board, breaking his clavicle. The enemy then jumped on his back, dislocating his shoulder and knocking off his night-vision goggles. Pryor continued to fight, eventually killing all four. For his pure Soldier instinct, for engaging the enemy and continuing to lead, he was awarded the Silver Star.

Sgt. Maj. Joe Vega is the Hollywood-version of an operator: chiseled physique, a master breacher and a demolition expert. He played key roles in the capture of a South American dictator and the death of a Colombian drug lord, and he conducted operations against a Somali political leader who hindered international relief efforts. The last operation was made famous by the movie Black Hawk Down depicting the 1993 operation called “Restore Hope.” He was awarded the Silver Star for his actions. Later in Iraq in 2003, he was awarded a second Silver Star. Vega’s missions during his time in a Special Mission Unit are not releasable. The award simply states, “For his ability to consolidate and reorganize under extreme duress.” I am grateful for his guidance and friendship.

It was a true honor to serve with them all. The advice below is a combination of the five senior NCOs’ own words of what they think is important for Soldiers today and throughout their military careers:

Stay motivated.
Volunteer for assignments; don’t ever quit. You will fail — get up and try again.
Your reputation, the examples you set, will cast a long shadow. You will either inspire others or de-motivate them by your actions.
Be the guy with real experience, not just the theoretical or book knowledge.
Don’t go after the wounded, have them push themselves to you.
You learn more from your mistakes and misses than you ever will from your successes.
Maintain a warrior’s mindset in everything you do.
I cannot define what an act of valor is, but I do know what cowardice looks like.
Yelling is not an effective training tool; your training should develop solid basics and initiative.
Soldiers will do great things if there is trust.
Every experience is important to an NCO’s development, and every event is an opportunity to counsel.
Good leaders are valued over time.
As a leader you must constantly give hard problems to solve — this develops Soldiers.
Lead from the front. It’s everything.

Focus on the things that matter: fitness, values and training.

Humility: Don't just be the loud guy; it almost always identifies false bravado. Don't be afraid to bring up your own faults.

Remember — it is never about you; it is always about the Soldiers.

Never ever be the crab. Don't go sideways or backward, only move forward.

Be honest in everything you do. Grow to hate liars.

If more Soldiers did their jobs and demanded a higher level of execution, there would be significantly less need for valorous acts.

Take responsibility, take charge and take the initiative. You must make it happen.

Wear your body armor!

Soldiers may never experience the extreme living conditions or firefights the aforementioned Soldiers were engaged in. That fact does not decrease the importance of embodying the Army Values on a daily basis. As described above, use every opportunity to build trust with your Soldiers, peers and superiors alike. Nurturing that trust will serve Soldiers well today and throughout their time in the Army. This is especially true in a world of uncertainty that is more chaotic now than at any time in my military career. You will be called upon and, usually, at the most inopportune time. Ensure you and your Soldiers are ready.

Command Sgt. Maj. Daniel Hendrex has been selected to serve as the Combined Security Transition Command-Afghanistan (CSTC-A) command sergeant major. He recently completed his tour as 2nd Brigade, 1st Armored Division CSM, served as a fellow at the CSA Strategic Studies Group, and is the director of NCO Academy Mission Command recently formed under the United States Army Sergeants Major Academy. He served with the five NCOs mentioned in the article in the Asymmetric Warfare Group and interviewed them in the summer of 2014.

Sgt. Aura Sklenicka, a public affairs officer NCO at Fort Bliss, Texas, contributed to this article.