

# Inspiring Leadership

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Sgt. 1st Class Peter Cowley, a Basic Leader Course instructor from the 7th Army Training Command's Noncommissioned Officer Academy, mentors a Soldier from the 45th Infantry Brigade Combat Team during a BLC course at the Yavoriv Combat Training Center on the International Peacekeeping and Security Center in Western Ukraine, on Sept. 29. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Anthony Jones, 45th Infantry Brigade Combat Team)

A Soldier can spend his or her entire military career never finding that one truly inspiring mentor whose leadership style is both inspirational and motivating. However, military personnel with the good fortune of working under these inspiring leaders often attribute their personal success to these transformational leaders. I personally experienced this unique opportunity on many occasions throughout my 20 plus years of military service as an infantryman. These types of leaders are particularly easy to pick out of any crowd with their dominating presence, charisma and leadership, which is felt immediately upon arriving to a unit. Some units are cluttered with substandard soldiers, mediocre noncommissioned officers, and junior, and occasionally senior, officers whose toxic presence can destroy morale and cohesion. I have witnessed inspiring leaders who immediately recognize these deficiencies and instantly set out to create a positive, cohesive atmosphere where soldiers were motivated, they were prepared for combat, and they ultimately enhanced a command climate which fostered camaraderie. Not only do these types of leaders leave a lasting impression on their Soldiers but their leadership creates a legacy by the effect they have on countless Officers and NCOs. Since my first encounter with this type of inspiring leader, I have tried to hone my leadership style, and mirror their continuous success. After many years of multiple deployments and countless leadership positions, I was selected to attend the U.S. Army Sergeants Major Academy. I contribute my success to choosing the right mentors who have inspired me to be a better leader, care for and bringing out the best in Soldiers, and always thinking positively.

My first encounter with a truly caring mentor was during a unit awards ceremony in 2002 during my first tour in Germany. I was a young staff sergeant at the time, who had not deployed and had not heard the whiz or crack of enemy bullets in combat. I remember feeling disdain about attending an award ceremony for someone I did not even know and it was a Friday afternoon, the closing of a long week. I stood side by side with my fellow NCOs and soldiers, listening to the buzz about why we were there on a Friday afternoon and lingering in the humid, German mid-afternoon air. As the ceremony began, I caught my first glimpse of a sergeant major as he walked forward of the formation when his name was

called. He looked all the part of a seasoned, quintessential combat veteran. His uniform displayed the Combat Infantryman's Badge with a star affixed atop the wreath, a 1st Ranger Battalion combat scroll on his right shoulder sleeve, the coveted Bronze Service Star, and a 'mustard' stain on his Jump Master wings. 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. Up 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. 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 that 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, the sergeant major expressed that it was not his actions that earned him this award, but the actions of his men in Alpha Company, 1st Ranger Battalion while he was the company 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 skills. Identifying that the Army needed a more flexible infantryman, Army Chief of Staff, General Eric Shinseki announced the transformation, and it was in place by July 2001. Reaping the benefits, so to speak, of this new transformation, the above mentioned sergeant major was assigned to Vilseck, Germany with the 2nd Battalion, 2nd Infantry Regiment, "Ramrods" in the summer of 2002 as their battalion S-3 operations sergeant major. As the operations sergeant major, he was obsessed with the technical and tactical aspect of mechanized infantry and was constantly picking the brain of the battalion master gunner. Master gunners who "serve as the commanders' subject matter expert on all issues relating to the Bradley Fighting Vehicle beginning with the initial crew training and culmination with advanced and platoon qualification." The sergeant major was well aware that the superior technology and firepower that could be unleashed with the BFV against an enemy force would no doubt determine the outcome of any battle. As luck would have it, there were two battalion MGs (normally a battalion only has one) serving in the S-3 shop. One was the more senior MG, transitioning out of the S-3 shop, and I was the second, stepping in as his replacement for the next 18 months. We would spend countless hours answering questions thrown at us by the sergeant major about the logistical, technical, and tactical aspects of the Bradley and the training associated with the mechanized concept. He was determined to know everything there was about the Bradley, and it would take both MGs to satisfy his curiosity. These countless hours we spent together were met with an inspiring sense of camaraderie and there were many situations which helped to break down the "mechanized versus light" infantry barrier. We soon realized that the sergeant major was a real "down to earth" leader. His sheer presence commanded respect and his devotion to learning was solely wrapped in his devotion to taking care of Soldiers. His devotion, he said, "came from what his team, squad, and platoon had instilled in him as an NCO, the good qualities of a good leader." I remember thinking, "what a great concept, learning from your subordinates!" After these and many other encounters with the sergeant major, I promised myself to incorporate his leadership competencies and characteristics into my own personal style as I continued my career.

Over the next few months, I found myself scribbling notes about the sergeant major's leadership style in one of those typical, green Army notebooks. I would continue to write in this book and years later would go back and read some of the things that I had written. Most of my crayon-like hieroglyphics were anecdotes and lessons that I would use over the next ten years. One of note is something that the sergeant major had 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 the sergeant major immediately called me out in front of the entire battalion staff. "Brosch," he said, "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." His tone was a bit more than sarcastic, and I felt uneasy for the better part of an hour waiting for the meeting end. He approached me afterward and used my lateness as a learning experience; however I did not realize it at the time. The entire conversation took less than three minutes, and I remember walking away and 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, and I was able to decipher my own handwriting, gather my thoughts and it made much more sense. "You can't couch stupid and never make the same mistake twice." Even inside a good ole fashion butt chewing, I was able to pull away with something good to add to my little green book.

As the end of the summer was drawing near, our unit received orders to deploy to Iraq in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom II. An intense training plan was immediately set in motion, and the men were anxious to get into the fight with the rest of the Army. The sergeant major was a constant presence during routine and sometimes unconventional training of the unit 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 Operation Phantom Fury, the Battle for Fallujah, later that same 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 Operation Phantom Fury, the sergeant major was interviewed and asked about the unit's training plan prior to deploying to Iraq and this is what he shared:

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. The battalion leadership and I 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 (CQB) and close quarters marksmanship (CQM). With my background, I even ran a leadership program for the Soldiers in the brigade that came to Vilseck. We ran them through a quick two-day CQB and CQM to get the other two or three Battalions up to snuff where

we were at. I still have guys coming up to me and saying they thought it was horseshit that they had to go through the courses in Vilseck but said they wanted me to know it also saved their lives and other Soldier's lives as well.

Webster Dictionary defines courage as, "mental or moral strength to venture, persevere, and withstand danger, fear, or difficulty." During Operation Phantom Fury, on 11 November 2004, the battalion command sergeant major was killed by small-arms fire in the breach phase of the operation. The above mentioned sergeant major immediately and without hesitation assumed the role as the battalion command sergeant major. Positioned with the maneuver element of the task force in the heavy forward tactical operations center and commanding a Bradley, 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's executive officers was fatally wounded, his vehicle pinned down and unable to conduct casualty evacuation. The sergeant major, with a complete disregard for his own safety, positioned his Bradley 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. For his actions, the sergeant major received the Bronze Star Medal for Valor.

In a book titled *Maverick Military Leaders The Extraordinary Battles of Washington, Nelson, Patton, Rommel, and Others*, the author states, "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 the sergeant major's tenure as the senior enlisted NCO in charge of training of the battalion. He also displayed what that same author referred to as a "fatherly devotion to his men, seeing to their needs" and "an intense interest in raising morale." This sergeant major inherently displayed two of the sixteen distinct traits summarized in this same book. Granted, this sergeant major is not a commissioned officer like those referenced by the author and the sergeant major would likely scoff at the notion of being compared to the likes of Patton, Rommel and so many other "mavericks." Perhaps a look at what some of the Army's most senior leaders say about this sergeant major will shed some light onto his inspiration and leadership. When asked about this sergeant major's leadership, the current AFRICOM Commander, General Rodriguez, once stated:

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 2d and 3d order effects.

Over the last 12 years, it has been an illuminating experience to serve with such a great mentor as this sergeant major. He truly internalizes his beliefs, the Army Values and above all, cares for and brings out the best in Soldiers. Some argue about whether leaders are born or are made. While I personally think this is an argument that cannot be decisively resolved, retired General Colin Powell once stated, "Effective leaders are made, not born. They learn from trial and error and from the experience and puts it behind them." A statement the sergeant major has made practically mirrors Powell's, "never make the same mistake twice." Born or made, a leader must have come from some sort of background that fostered them into having a strong character with morals and beliefs that define them as individuals. I have seen my fair share of both great leaders and extremely toxic ones. The leader who cares and can bring out the best in their subordinates is the one who will be successful and never forgotten.

Self-awareness, adaptability, and most important, the ability to reflect on who I was and where I came from have no doubt been contributing factors in my success thus far in the Army. The sergeant major'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, caring deeply for his subordinates, embodying the warrior ethos, and exercising the core leadership competencies as outlined in Army Doctrine Publication 6-22. I attribute my accomplishments and success to this sergeant major's inspiring leadership and mentoring.

If you would like to learn more about this topic I recommend you take the time to read Robert Harvey, *Maverick Military Leaders, the Extraordinary Battles of Washington, Nelson, Patton, Rommel and others* (2008); Kendall Gott (ed.), *Eyewitness to War. The US Army in Operation AL FAJR: An Oral History Volume II* (2006); and Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 6-22, *Army Leadership*.

