

CSA Counts on NCOs to Keep the Spirit Alive

By Gen. Dennis J. Reimer, CSA

Originally published in the Spring 1996 edition



“We have good corporals and sergeants, and some good lieutenants and captains, and those are far more important than good generals.” –Gen. W. T. Sherman

America’s Army is unique. You – the noncommissioned officer – are the reason. Secretary of Defense William Perry likes to relate a story that occurred last summer when Gen. Nikolayev, the deputy chief of the Russian General Staff, was on a two-week tour of military bases in the United States. After visiting the first base and seeing our NCOs in action, he told one of his aides: behind the ears, and as green as new lieutenants get.

“I know that these men and women wearing sergeants’ uniforms are really officers in disguise.”

But as he went from base to base and talked with the NCOs, he came to realize that they were not officers. He was stunned and told Dr. Perry after two weeks, “No military in the world had the quality of NCOs that I found in the United States.” He went on to say, “That’s what gives America its competitive advantage.” That’s why we have the best military in the world.

The high quality of our NCO Corps was manifested recently when America’s Army bridged the Sava River between Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. This operation, the construction of the longest pontoon bridge constructed since World War II, was conducted under the most difficult circumstances. Despite freezing cold, snow, rain, mud and a 100-year high flooding of the river, the bridge was completed. Again, it was our NCO Corps that stepped in and made it happen. The world media was impressed by the technical competence, drive, determination, and leadership of our NCOs. When one reporter asked how the Soldiers endured the cold and went sleepless to complete the bridge, one young leader, Staff Sgt. Robert Butcher of the 535th Combat Support Equipment Company, said that the Soldiers felt their reputations were on the line. *They weren’t going to let the river win.*

Sgt. Lawrence Galuski, of the 502nd Engineer Company, said, “We can’t be stopped; we’ve had floods, high water, rain, snow—makes no difference. We still bridged it.” Command Sgt. Maj. Stephen Walls of the 130th Engineer Brigade said building this bridge proves America’s Army is the “Best in the world.”

For 220 years, NCOs have been the guardians of the Republic. In this increasingly complex and technologically advanced world more and more responsibility has been placed in NCO hands. The NCO Corps must ensure America’s Army remains trained and ready today and adapts to meet the challenges of the 21st century. To accomplish this, I would like to share three fundamental truths with you.

First, the Army is people. Gen. Creighton Abrams said, “The Army is not made up of people, the Army is people.” The Army can accomplish its mission if we recruit and retain the best people. Today, we have the best quality Soldiers I have observed in 33 years in the Army. But to keep these high-quality Soldiers we must allow them to build their self-respect. I remember reading a message some years ago that always struck me as the essence of the importance of the individual. It reads:

Remember me? I’m the person who goes into the orderly room and patiently waits while the first sergeant or AST (Army Supply Technician) does everything but pay attention to me. I’m the guy who goes into the supply room and stands quietly by while the supply sergeant and his assistant finish their little chitchat. I’m the person who does not grumble while I clean rifles in addition to my own while other people wander aimlessly around the center. Yes, you might say I’m a pretty good person. But do you know who else I am? ***I am the person who never extends my enlistment,*** and it amuses me to see you spending many hours and dollars every year to get me back in to your unit, when I was there in the first place. All you had to do to keep me was:

“Give me a little attention, show me a little courtesy, use me well.” —Aubrey Newman (from Follow Me: The Human Element of Leadership)

I need your help on this. You, the NCO, are closest to our Soldiers. Therefore, your care and concern is most evident. Your personal example will have the most direct effect on our ability to retain the quality Soldiers needed to meet the challenges of the 21st century.



U.S. Army photo by Wayne V. Hall

Second, is public trust. By this I mean the trust the American people place in America's Army. Stop and think about what that really means. The American people trust us in a way they trust nobody else. They give us their sons and daughters and they expect us to take care of them. They do not ask what we are going to do with them. They just expect us to do what is right. That is why the opportunity and responsibility to train these young men and women to ensure they are prepared to do their mission when they deploy is so important. This is your primary responsibility. Every effective NCO leader is a skilled trainer, and every skilled trainer is an effective leader.

But I think it's important that we remind everybody that we have that trust to take care of our Soldiers, America's sons and daughters—and that trust is very important to us. I know you take that responsibility seriously.

Third, values are important. We are a values-oriented organization and we need to recognize and remember that. Values are not something that automatically happen, especially in today's society. You have to spend time talking about values, explaining to new Soldiers coming into the Army what values are all about and reinforce those values to all Soldiers on a daily basis.

Duty, Honor, Country and selfless service to the nation are more than words—it is a creed by which we live. The actions in Somalia by Master Sgt. Gary I. Gordon and Sgt. 1st Class Randall D. Shugart, both Special Forces NCOs who were posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor, epitomize the highest Army values.

During a firefight in Mogadishu, on October 3-4, 1993, Somali gunfire forced a Blackhawk helicopter to crash land in enemy territory. Master Sgt. Gordon and Sgt. 1st Class Shugart fired their rifles from another helicopter to protect their comrades at the crash site below them, even though they endured a heavy barrage of fire. With Somali gunmen closing on four critically wounded Soldiers at the crash site, the two NCOs volunteered to help and fought their way through to the wounded pilot. They provided cover until their ammunition ran out. When Sgt. 1st Class Shugart was fatally wounded, Master Sgt. Gordon got a rifle from the crash site and handed the weapon and five weapons to the pilot. Master Sgt. Gordon said, "Good luck," and armed with only a pistol, continued the fight until he was killed.

Values are what made them do what they did and those are the things you must emphasize to all new Soldiers. We need to talk about those values and I ask you to do that. All of us in leadership positions must be able to exemplify values. Talk is not enough—you must set the example.

These three fundamental truths are terribly important and I need you as leaders to understand and exemplify these truths. Remember that the Army is people. Gen. Abrams captured the essence of leadership and of the NCO Corps when he said:

"By people I do not mean personnel...I mean living, breathing, serving human beings. They have needs and interests and desires. They have spirit and will and strengths and abilities. They have weaknesses and faults; and they have means. They are the heart of our preparedness...and this is preparedness—as a nation and as an Army—depends upon the spirit of our Soldiers. It is the spirit that gives the Army...life. Without it we cannot succeed."

I am counting on you to keep this spirit alive. ■

Prior to becoming the 33rd Chief of Staff, U.S. Army, Gen. Reimer was commanding general of the U.S. Army, Forces Command, Fort McPherson, Georgia. Reimer's military experience spans command positions from company to division level and service on staffs up to Headquarters, Department of the Army.

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