

"Top" Olivari says...

Stay In Your Lane

By Command Sgt. Maj. J. D. Pendry

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First Sgt. Pedro Olivari was an influential role model for me. He spoke with a heavy accent, but like others, I always listened intently.

He received a battlefield commission during the Korean War, achieved the rank of captain and had a company command. A reduction in force gave him the option of leaving the Army or becoming a sergeant again. To the Army's good fortune, he elected the latter.

He was proud of the time he spent as an officer, but was quick to let you know how serious he was about being a sergeant. He had trained, cared for and led Soldiers in peace and combat both as an officer and a sergeant.

His perspective on soldiering was unique and valuable. His advice was tested and sound. He knew his lane.

"Top" Olivari wasn't the recruiting poster image you may be painting in your mind. Instead, he was five feet, six inches tall and barrel-chested. A stubby cigar was his constant companion.

He was prone to do things that were unheard of in 1972. Every night, for example, alone and wearing canvas sneakers, he would run about five laps around the perimeter of Camp Red Cloud, Korea. He did this at a time when the focus on physical fitness in the Army was not at the forefront. I haven't seen Camp Red Cloud in a number of years, but in 1972 that was a pretty good run.

The most vivid memories I have of Olivari mentoring Soldiers and officers was usually while standing around an old diesel space heater in the Quonset hut that served as the HHC, 1 Corps orderly room.

Usually, some section sergeants and sometimes a lieutenant or two stopped off there after morning formation. Top never kept his own office; he just had a desk out front beside the company's clerk.

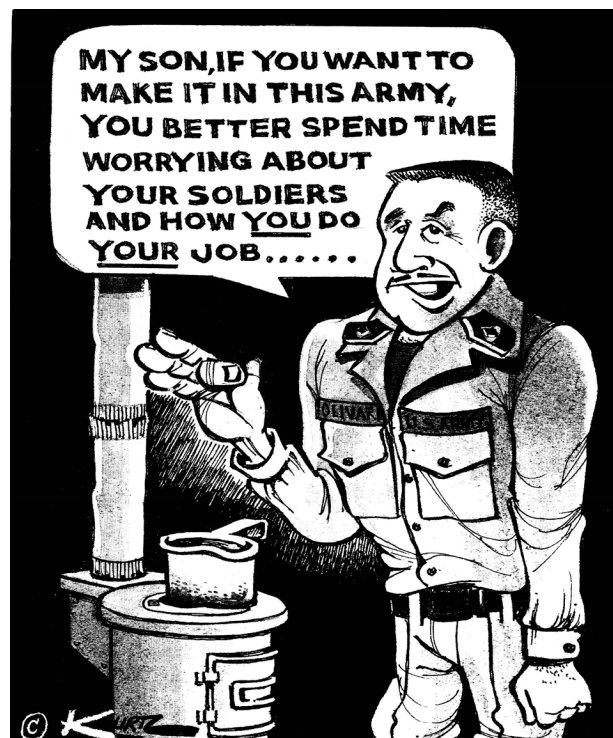
There was a room he could have used, but for whatever reason, he never did.

Top's morning usually consisted of going over his duty roster meticulously with red and blue pencils, looking at the CQ duty journal and just listening. One morning, after listening for a while to some sergeants complain about an officer who they didn't think was doing his job very well, Top got into one of his counseling sessions.

His movements were always the same and served as a signal that something was coming. He would get up from his desk, saunter over to the heater and stand directly across from the most vocal individual there. He would hold his hands out and rub them together over the stove for a few seconds.

Then he would take the cigar stub out of the corner of his mouth. Holding it between his thumb and forefinger and using his remaining three fingers like a pointer he would always start by saying: "My son," (that was how he addressed everyone).

This particular morning, he told the sergeant, "My son, if you want to make it in this Army, you better spend your time worrying about your soldiers and how you do your job. You have to know what you're supposed to do and then do it. Don't waste your time worrying about how an officer does his job. That's officer's business. If your Soldiers fail it won't be an officer's fault." What he told that sergeant was... "Stay in your lane."



Another time, after listening to a sergeant's complaints about his Soldiers being more interested in going to the clubs in the village than they were in doing their jobs – and going through his choreographed steps, he said, "My son, Soldiers go where their sergeants lead them."

I observed and was the benefactor of many of these counseling sessions. Lately, I've had reason to reflect on just how solid Top Olivari's advice still is.

In every facet of our lives, whether social, professional, before, during or after the Army, we will always have or have had a specific role to play. We always have a lane in which to operate. In team sports, we had a position to play – a lane. If we got out of our lane and into another's the team would break down and if we continued to operate out of our lane the team would fail.

In our profession, we're obligated to fulfill our role by providing leadership to, and the proper example for, our junior Soldiers to follow. Put simply, in everything we do, we have to clearly define our lane and stay in it. We have to know its boundaries and all the challenges that lie within those boundaries. If we fail to meet the challenges that are in our lane, our team will break down and ultimately fail.

If you know your lane, then staying in it is easy. When NCOs are in the structure of a platoon, squad or team, the lane boundaries and everything in the lane is generally clear to them. A lot of sergeants, finding themselves in an environment with less structure, sometimes lose focus of what is in their lane.

Our lane of responsibility is spelled out in *Army Regulation (AR) 600-20: Army Command Policy*, Chapter 3, "Enlisted Aspects of Command." The sum of these responsibilities equals taking care of Soldiers.

Taking care of Soldiers means counseling and knowing them, training them to standard, enforcing discipline and setting an example for them to emulate. These responsibilities never waiver and are always in our lane, regardless of our mission.

They are the same for a sergeant in charge of Soldiers in a personnel service center as they are for a sergeant in charge of Soldiers in an infantry platoon. Soldier care responsibilities don't change with mission – they are constant.

Above and before all else, we have to remember we are sergeants. It's when we start calling ourselves "senior enlisted advisors," or the "NCOIC" of something or other that our lanes start to get a little unclear.

In other words, when we refer to ourselves as job descriptions instead of sergeants, we start losing track of who we are and what we do. By forgetting that we're sergeants before we are anything else, we narrow our lane or focus too much. When that happens, the most important obligation and responsibility in our lane – taking care of Soldiers falls out of it.

As NCOs, we lead by example, by staying in our lane and knowing our obligations within the boundaries of our lane.

Recently, I asked an NCOIC to tell me exactly what it was he was in charge of. He answered with a detailed briefing that included the section's mission, how it was accom-

plished and how well it was accomplished, measured by the DA standard for accomplishing that particular mission.

During the briefing, he never mentioned his responsibilities as a sergeant to the Soldiers in the section. I was impressed with his job knowledge.

When I asked him about taking care of Soldiers, his answers weren't given with the same zeal as was his mission briefing. I asked questions about things that are in the NCO lane of responsibility defined in *AR 600-20*. I asked about counseling. The answer offered was a recital of his unit's policy on counseling.

When I asked to see one of his counseling records, he couldn't produce one because counseling wasn't being done. When I asked about physical training, he told me, "Because of the constraints of our mission, we do it on our own." Doing it on their own meant a private now had the responsibility to develop and maintain an adequate physical fitness program—something a lot of sergeants have difficulty with.

The sergeant pushed a Soldier-care responsibility that was plainly his, out of his lane. I asked the sergeant what happened if one of his Soldiers failed the APFT or became overweight. His reply was that "...the first sergeant takes care of that."

Now the sergeant was pushing responsibility out of his lane and into the first sergeant's. There were more questions with similar replies during our discussion. When our talk was over, the sergeant had cleared his lane of Soldier-care responsibilities. Too many times, the responsibility was placed in the Soldier's lane, or forgotten altogether.

I've faced this situation in TDA and TOE organizations. I find it's not germane to one or the other. It's a clear example of a sergeant forgetting who he is and what he does. By neglecting his Soldier-care responsibilities, he wandered out of his lane and into an officer's lane. Officers have a different focus, another lane. They put the main focus on the mission at hand and concentrate on the collective picture. They do that because they know who shoulders the responsibility to provide them with trained and cared-for Soldiers to accomplish the mission.

Our failure to meet that responsibility violates our creed and breaks down the team. Our Soldiers lose confidence in us, our support channel breaks down and officers pick up the Soldier-care responsibility we neglected. When that happens, we scream like banshees because

some officer is meddling in sergeant's business.

Before we do that though, we need to make sure we're not the cause of the officer being in our lane in the first place. As NCOs, it's our responsibility not only to take care of Soldiers, but to help sergeants define and stay in their lane. If we allow taking care of Soldiers to drop out of our lane, think what lesson we're teaching tomorrow's

sergeants. Tomorrow's sergeant are who we will charge to look after our sons and daughters.

Remember – "My son, Soldiers go where their sergeants lead them. Stay in your lane, sergeant." ■

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