



U.S. Army Staff Sgt. Julio Agosto, an advisor with 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 101st Airborne Division, signs the cast of a Ukrainian soldier during Rapid Trident 2019 at Combat Training Center-Yavoriv, Ukraine, September 2019. (Photo courtesy of U.S. Army Staff Sgt. Julio Agosto)

Reflections on Team and Squad-Level Leadership

By Staff Sgt. Julio Agosto

101st Airborne Division (AASLT)

Recently, I served as an advisor to Ukrainian Observer, Controller/Trainers (OC/T) as part of the Joint Multinational Training Group-Ukraine (JMTG-U). This opportunity was beneficial on both a personal and professional level. The deployment allowed me to observe the Ukrainian military, affording me an opportunity to reflect on how I train my Soldiers at home. Moreover, it allowed the observation of troops who were engaged in conflict with one of our potential adversaries. The result of these reflections are five maxims that are relevant to today's noncommissioned officer (NCO) and their preparation for the future fight. They are ever-present reminders of the need for engaged leaders at the squad-level and below, and the costs in failure to do so.

A Culture of Trust

U.S. Army Gen. Norman Schwarzkopf said, "The more you sweat in peace, the less you bleed in war" (Norton, 1991). Our Ukrainian partners were the living embodiment of this philosophy as they worked hard during the rotation preparing for what could be another fight against Russia (Kuzio, 2020). It was noticed during several rotations that their unit leadership is centralized and reliant on junior officers. This resulted in their

NCOs, even those with operational experience, not being empowered in strong leadership positions.

This is not to say that our counterpart's leadership structure was a failure. Supporting officers is a part of the NCO Creed: "Officers of my unit will have maximum time to accomplish their duties; they will not have to accomplish mine" (Department of the Army, n.d., para. 3). Empowering officers is also predicated on mutual trust between officers and NCOs. A trust that training and

mentoring junior NCOs is taking place correctly, and missions are carried out efficiently within the commander's intent (Department of the Army, 2019).

Discipline

While observing and advising the Ukrainian military, I witnessed some outstanding units led by exceptional leaders, as well as individual soldiers who exemplified discipline and initiative. One morning, I saw a soldier carrying a sniper rifle, and I asked him about the sniper course he attended and how they employ this weapon in a mechanized infantry company. He smiled at me and said, "They issued me this weapon. I am not a sniper." I returned the smile and asked him what his job was. He replied, "a BMP-2 (amphibious infantry fighting vehicle) crewman," but he explained he had taught himself to be proficient enough with the rifle to kill his enemy. This is a great example of personal discipline and initiative to go beyond what is asked and fill a role that his unit needed.

Former UCLA basketball coach John Wooden (coached his team to 10 NCAA championships in 12 years at UCLA) was relentless about discipline and adherence to fundamentals in all aspects of life, both on and off the basketball court. Wooden expected neatness of dress, and even taught future Hall of Famers how to put on their socks properly and lace up their shoes. "An individual grounded in the fundamentals has a much higher likelihood of success when sudden change is forced upon him." (Wooden, 2005, p. 143).

In the Army, this same discipline regarding fundamentals should be expected at all levels, from the unit leader down to the most junior-ranking Soldier. How can a unit trust in a timely resupply out in the field when their leadership is routinely late? Discipline requires buy-in and reciprocity, and must be trained and expected at all levels throughout an NCO's career (Department of the Army, 2020).

Leaders' Training Time

It is a common refrain for NCOs to claim they either do not have enough time because of mundane tasks or a lack of white space, but resourceful NCOs will create time or creatively use opportunities or scenarios to add in extra training to improve unit readiness and lethality. To take it a step further, team leaders should not only have classes prepared, but also be able to teach in a way that encourages development and provokes thought and action (Perry & Fenrick, 2020).



(U.S. Army photo by 1st Lt. Lynn Chui taken Sept. 16, 2019) (From Right) U.S. Army Capt. Marttin Periola and Staff Sgt. Julio Agosto, both with 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 101st Airborne Division, lead an after action review for a multinational audience as part of Rapid Trident 2019 at Combat Training Center-Yavoriv, Ukraine, Sept. 16, 2019.

In *TC 7-22.7: The Noncommissioned Officer Guide*:

☞ Hip-pocket training is also used to sustain proficiencies for crew based skills. For example during down-time at a weapons range, it provides an additional opportunity to train drills for crew served weapon systems, or other crew oriented tasks. (Department of the Army, 2020, p. 4-8) ☞

By consistently training their subordinates, NCOs are not only preparing their units for the next mission, they are also instilling confidence in them that they will perform their duties correctly when the time comes.

Do Not Be Afraid to Fail

Similar to American units on rotations through the combat training centers, our Ukrainian partners routinely struggled to meet training standards. Yet, what was impressive was how they accepted feedback and systematically improved in every event without fear of failure. This willingness to learn is paramount to unit improvement and advancing training scenarios to complex levels.

To achieve this level of instruction and learning, Soldiers must be directly engaged and challenged throughout these scenarios, as well as in the after action reviews. What was the information our reconnaissance effort deployed to attain? Why did you not move the gun along the high-speed avenue of approach? How might this situational training exercise be improved?

Soldiers need realistic training conditions to reinforce both basic and advanced tactics. The training must increase in complexity and stress Soldiers' ability to react when things do not go as planned (Fenrick et al., 2019). Only then will they understand the importance of funda-

mentals and the growth that accompanies failure.

Lethality

According to retired Army Gen. William Depuy, an architect of Army doctrine and the first commander of U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command, “You can’t see an infantry squad—it is an idea that exists only when jointly held by its members.” (DePuy, 1994, p. 17). This means there should be a commonality across the members of a squad born from rigorous training that routinizes certain actions.

A prominent observation throughout the recent JMTG-U rotation is that the *team element* does not

exist within our partner force. Ukraine’s smallest unit was a squad, a group of 9 to 12 soldiers but without any small group leaders directing, motivating, or holding them accountable. Their platoon leader disseminated information to a “section commander” but then little guidance was passed down to the squad itself. If fire teams and squads are the most lethal element of any army, they must be guided, not just directed. This allows them to grow as leaders and encourages them to use their creativity to accomplish the mission, promoting an effective decentralized form of command (Department of the Army, 2019).

I was often surprised by the morale and resourcefulness of the Ukrainians, as well as their hospitality and compassion. Every day the Ukrainian units would gather in a line and shake my hand as an honored guest in their home. They would offer gifts and invite us to eat with them. This seemed inherently backwards as they were the ones who would soon rotate back to combat.

One morning, a Ukrainian officer approached wearing a cast on his arm. He handed me a black marker and asked me to draw an American flag on his cast. This gesture, given the short duration of our relationship, was an example of our influence and great relationship with the Ukrainian military.

I cannot begin to measure the lasting impression this experience and their kindness had on me. Working with, teaching, and learning from the Ukrainian military helped me grow as a person, as well as an NCO. I am grateful for the chance to reflect on this deployment and give back to the NCO community by highlighting areas that can be improved for the future fight. ■

References

- Department of the Army. (n.d.). *NCO Creed*. <https://www.army.mil/values/nco.html>
- Department of the Army. (2019). *ADP 6-0: Mission command: Command and control of Army forces*. https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR_pubs/DR_a/pdf/web/ARN19189_ADP_6-0_FINAL_WEB_v2.pdf
- Department of the Army. (2020). *The noncommissioned officer guide*. https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR_pubs/DR_a/pdf/web/ARN20340_TC%207-22x7%20FINAL%20WEB.pdf
- DePuy, W. E. (1994). Selected papers of General William E. DePuy. RM Swain, (ed.). <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Portals/7/combats-studies-institute/csi-books/Selected-Papers-of-General-William-Depuy.pdf>
- Fenrick, P., Conrad, H., & Wiggins, D. (2019). 2019 U.S. Army Best Warrior Competition: Lessons learned. *NCO Journal*. <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/NCO-Journal/Archives/2020/January/BWC-Lessons-Learned/>
- Kuzio, T. (2020). Russia is quietly occupying Ukraine’s information space. Atlantic Council. <https://www.atlantic-council.org/blogs/ukrainealert/russia-is-quietly-occupying-ukraines-information-space/>
- Norton, M. (1991). Naval Academy graduates get a Schwarzkopf send-off “The more you sweat in peace, the less you bleed in war,” general says. *The Baltimore Sun*. <https://www.baltimoresun.com/news/bs-xpm-1991-05-30-1991150152-story.html>
- Perry, J. & Fenrick, P. (2020). Preparing for LSCO and the future fight. *NCO Journal*. <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/NCO-Journal/Archives/2020/June/Preparing-for-LSCO/>
- Wooden, John. (2005). *Wooden on leadership: How to create a winning organization*. McGraw Hill Professional.

Staff Sgt. Julio Agosto is a cavalry scout NCO in the U.S. Army. He is currently serving as a section leader for Apache Troop, 1st Squadron, 75th Cavalry Regiment, 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault). He previously served as a team leader in 1st Squadron, 7th Cavalry Regiment in Fort Hood, Texas. Agosto will soon be attending the U.S. Army Drill Sergeant Academy.

Disclaimer: The views expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the NCO Journal, the U.S. Army, or the Department of Defense.

