



A UH-1D helicopter climbs skyward after discharging a load of infantrymen during combat operations at la Drang Valley, Vietnam, November 1965. (Photo courtesy of U.S. Army)

Applicable Team Building in the Army: Past and Present

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Looking back on the U.S. Army's history, teams have always been a key part of how the Army achieves success on the battlefield. The famed historic actions at the Battle of la Drang, during the Vietnam War, is an example of how teamwork is a vital part of mission success, along with maintaining a defensible position and a chain of command. The Army has always valued team building, and through both historical and personal experiences, I will show that team building has, and always will be important to the Army and its Soldiers.

Team building will always remain a vital part of our future force, keeping Soldiers ready and willing to be part of their team and keeping them ready to defend their battle buddy no matter the situation or circumstances. Team building is a vital part of the Army because Soldiers

need to feel as though they are a part of a team if they are going to be willing to fight and die for a teammate and their country. Soldiers need to be taught their position and responsibility within that team. In the Army, as on any good team, there is a hierarchy. And in the Army, that hierarchy is exercised through *Mission Command*.

Utilizing Mission Command during the Battle of Landing Zone (LZ) X-Ray, as part of the Battle of la Drang, teamwork helped 2nd Lt. Henry Herrick's platoon stay alive while they defended themselves long enough to receive support. During this battle, 2nd Platoon, Bravo Company, 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry Regiment, touched down on LZ X-Ray and the platoon leader, 2nd Lt. Herrick, found himself and his platoon surrounded. During the ensuing battle, Herrick was killed. But before

he was killed, he performed his vital role as the platoon leader giving specific instructions to destroy signal codes and call in artillery support, without which the enemy would have completely overrun the platoon.

After his death, Sgt. 1st Class Mac McHenry was supposed to take over command responsibilities, but he was not co-located with the platoon so command was passed to Sgt. Carl Palmer until he too was killed. Sgt. Robert Stokes then took over and was killed minutes later. Sgt. Ernie Savage, not a Soldier in line for command at all, then assumed responsibility for the remainder of the platoon due to his proximity to the radio. That was the most viable use of command at that point.

These command transitions show that without teamwork and the team's ability not only to perform their duties, but also those of their fallen team members, 2nd Platoon would not have been able to hold their ground for the duration of the battle at LZ X-Ray. This is just one historical example of how providing Soldiers with the necessary knowledge of how to act as a team, and how to act as a team member can and does save lives while successfully accomplishing the mission.

As a platoon sergeant, when I received a new Soldier I would assign him to a squad and have his new squad leader and team leader come talk to me directly to receive my guidance. The drill would be to administer an Army Physical Fitness Test and conduct a foot march in order to assess him and help his leaders evaluate his mental and physical state. We would also inspect his Organizational Clothing and Individual Equipment, conduct an initial counseling, record his contact and next of kin information, assign him a battle buddy, identify any special needs he may have such as a family member enrolled in the Exceptional Family Member Program, and get him settled into the unit's battle rhythm.

Most of the administrative requirements were conducted in the first couple of days to ensure that the Soldier was ready to work and that we could determine if they, or their families, needed something right away so we could address it immediately and not become distracted by an issue later while the Soldier is training. It was about letting them know that, "hey, we are your Family and we're here to look out for you" and set them up for success. The most important step was to assign the right battle buddy.

Little did that Soldier know that everything taking place would be tied together through their battle buddy. Their success and failure as well as their learning and accountability. They were a team, and the sooner they bonded and fostered a relationship, the better it was for them. Where one was, there was the other.



U.S. Army Soldiers of the 1st Cavalry Division (airmobile) in action at la Drang Valley, Vietnam, November 1965. (Photo courtesy of U.S. Army)

It was all based off how I grew up in the Army and how I followed the Ranger Creed. They would learn to rely on each other and the rest of their team from the start. I can remember a time when my battle buddy and I would execute training, a tasking or corrective training, and how we became like brothers. We learned to exist through our teamwork. And, at times, I am certain that our squad leader might have thought we were becoming too much alike.

Team building is useful in the operational environment, but it is also useful elsewhere because it creates a connection between Soldiers. This connection will save the lives of Soldiers in combat and on the streets here in the United States. Preventing certain problems throughout our ranks like suicide and sexual assault, as well as mitigating disorders like post-traumatic stress, can all be done through proper team building and trust building.

Team building doesn't just build a team that can achieve mission success, it also builds friendship among the Soldiers. This friendship will help them see past, and work through, emotionally charged issues that can occur such as male and female Soldiers working in a close environment. This friendship is much more likely to prevent a Soldier from acting against his or her teammate than any amount of training can.

Therefore, team building is more likely to keep Soldiers on one another's side. Preventing suicide is a number one priority in the Army today because of the high rate of suicides amongst our Soldiers. One every 18 hours. This horrific act can be prevented by team building and keeping the Soldiers so close that they are likely to go to their battle buddies for help long before their emotional state ever escalates to that point.

Early detection is the number one deterrent against suicide. Clearly, deterrence is made easier if a Soldier is willing to talk with their teammates. The Soldier will also be more likely to feel guilty about leaving someone behind if he or she feels close to their unit, their friends and their teammates.

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) can also be lessened by camaraderie which is built by creating the feeling of a team and esprit de corps among the Soldiers. If nothing else, the feeling of loss, isolation, and depression that can be associated with PTSD can be lessened when a Soldier feels that they belong to something bigger than him or herself.

While I was the platoon sergeant for a reconnaissance unit, I used techniques that built teamwork and helped my Soldiers come together. During our preparation for deployment, my unit bonded as the training tempo picked up as we progressed from fire team training to squad and platoon training. As we did that, I also started introducing more group physical training like Crossfit and rotating it with sports. With both activities it built team work and a good sense of competition and trust.



(U.S. Air Force photo by Airman 1st Class Monica Roybal taken Sept. 18, 2019)
U.S. Army Soldiers help a teammate climb a wall during a field training exercise at Joint Base Langley-Eustis, Virginia, Sept. 18, 2019.

These activities paid huge dividends as my platoon was one of the most heavily engaged platoons in Southeast Afghanistan. During those tough times they could lean on each other for support and they knew that the man next to them would be there. On one occasion one of my Soldiers came to me and let me know that some of the other Soldiers were packing their room and personnel belongings as if they would not be coming back each time they left on a mission. This Soldier's trust in me and his leadership, and that he felt open enough to talk about the issue, was powerful; it allowed the Soldiers to talk about their fear.

I feel that the team building we did beforehand was vital and helped us take care of our Soldiers during that hectic time. We did have one incident on that deployment, during Thanksgiving, when we received a new Soldier. After only two days of being in country, this Soldier decide to take his own life. I can't help but think that if this Soldier would have been with us sooner and felt they were a valuable member of the team that they would have brought it up to one of their leaders or friends and sought help. The bond my platoon had during that time was as thick as blood and the Soldiers were resilient.

During a seven-month break after returning from deployment, we were sent back overseas. Like other units, we lost personnel from Permanent Change of Station, Expiration Term of Service, and promotions. The team we had formed was scattered and I had to start anew. I had new team leaders and had to regroup.

I was lucky enough to retain one of my NCOs which had been a Soldier on my team from the previous deployment. We did hard physical training (PT) that built us up, concentrating on buddy runs where we would rotate and learn about each other. We'd do buddy carries to build on the trust based on the principle that we will never leave a fallen comrade; and in an unconventional method, we would go to the movies, dinner, and watch games together to help us feel like a Family rather than strangers.

Even though we were from many different parts of America, different ethnic backgrounds, religions, and beliefs, we were as close as brothers. The men learned to rely on each other during times of war or even during inter-squad events.

One of the unfortunate times to learn if you have built a solid team is when that team is at its darkest hour. When you have to conduct first aid on one of your teammates and Medevac one of your guys, that's when you see it. Even in the darkest hour, I saw the team at its finest; the young private first class automatically calling in the nine-line request, the specialist performing first aid on his sergeant.

At our worst time, I felt proud.

As a first sergeant I have found that engaged leadership is the key to team building. I have found that even though my schedule is full of meetings, deadlines, and requirements, that still taking the time to talk to my Soldiers throughout the day pays off. That simple act of taking five minutes from my day to talk to them shows them that they are part of my team and I value them.

This has helped by showing my Soldiers that even as a senior NCO, I am still human. I talk to them one on one about their demons and show them there is nothing

wrong with getting help. PTSD seems to be high in our formations, and it is likely much higher than what the Army percentages reflect because our misguided warrior mentality does not allow us to show our injuries or signs of weakness.

If a leader can take the time and show the compassion and care for his or her team and show them that it is ok to talk about their issues, then we can make a difference. Team building doesn't need to be a rite of passage; it should be a welcoming of a new strength to your team. Hard, physical, and disciplined training builds teams more than name-calling or hazing events that are only made to entertain those that are already a part of the team.

Training your Soldiers and spending time mentoring and guiding them will pay off in the end. It could be the thing that encourages that private to take charge or become the person who might conduct first aid on you, or save your life. Team building in the Army, more than anywhere else, saves lives.

In conclusion, the Army's team building practices have always been a necessary part of unit cohesion. The present day team building portions of Army training will keep Soldiers ready to work with, and willing to protect their fellow Soldiers in the future. Team building will also keep Soldiers fighting for one another both on and off the battlefield, preventing things like suicide and sexual assault as well as lessening the effects of PTSD.

My personal experiences with teamwork have proven to me that it builds a stronger and more solid unit. Keeping individual Soldiers physically and emotionally strong is important to the success of the mission, but keeping the teams that make up our Army strong will create a lasting bond which will outlast us all.

If you would like to learn more about this topic, I recommend you take the time to read *Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 6-22: Army Leadership*, *Field Manual 22-51: Leader Manual for Combat Stress Control*, and *Field Manual 22-102: Soldier Team Development*. ■



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