Things I Wish I Knew

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Then-Spc. Phillip Fenrick at FOB Dragon, Iraq, 2006.

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NCO Journal

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Advice from Your Current Self to Your Younger Self

The purpose of this column is for senior NCOs to provide advice and direction to young NCOs to ensure they are on the right path to life and career development.

This is an opportunity for senior leaders to mentor the NCO Corps with the wisdom they wish they would have had as junior leaders.

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Master Sgt. Phillip Fenrick

Master Sgt. Phillip Fenrick is the operations sergeant major for 1st Battalion, 6th Infantry Regiment, 2nd Brigade, 1st Armored Division, at Ft. Bliss, Texas. He is a graduate of the Sergeants Major Academy (Class 72). His previous assignments include troop sergeant major for the Asymmetric Warfare Group's Leadership Development Troop; Rifle Company, Heavy Weapons Company, and Headquarters and Headquarters Company first sergeant for 1st Battalion, 501st Infantry Regiment (Airborne). Fenrick deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan multiple times in various leadership positions. He holds two bachelor's degrees, a BS in Strategic Studies and Defense Analysis from Norwich University and a BA in Leadership and Workforce Development from the Army Command and General Staff College. He also has a master's degree in Leadership Studies from the University of Texas at El Paso.

Cover Photo: This picture is from my first deployment to Iraq in 2006, while serving with 2nd Battalion, 14th Infantry Regiment, the Golden Dragons. The abandoned power plant was called FOB Dragon and was located in one of the worst areas of the infamously called the Sunni Triangle of Death. This was where my company built up its presence and patrolled for 15 long and arduous months. We fought hard and lost good friends during that deployment. I think of them and that hard deployment when I see this picture.

Master Sgt. Fenrick (right) and Vincent Esperanza (left), a WWII veteran and a member of the 501st Parachute Infantry Regiment, in St. Mere-Eglise, France in 2018 for the 74th D-Day Remembrance Jump in Normandy. This photo is special to me because it was an honor to be a part of this annual celebration and to meet a legendary hero from our actual unit in France and to get to speak with him, have a beer with him, swap stories, and just have fun and sing many songs together, especially Blood on the Risers, his personal favorite.

Nostalgia creeps up on older men after a lifetime of experiences. Many like myself wonder if things would be different if we could do it all over again with the knowledge we have now. After 20 years of military service, I realize I've been in the Army longer than some of our newer Soldiers have been alive. In Army years, this makes me the old man in a profession full of young, hungry, and impressionable Soldiers.

As I look back on my career, I cringe at some of the things I did and said as a young Soldier and leader. Thankfully, throughout my years of service, I've had outstanding leaders, role models, mentors, loyal friends, and a patient family to help steer me in the right direction. Or at least were there to offer me a hand up when I fell flat on my face—which happened more than once. If only I knew then what I know now, things would've been so much different. However, even if I could go back in time and give advice to my younger self I don't know if I would've listened. After all, as a young NCO I thought I knew everything—about everything. Regardless of whether I would've listened or not, here is the advice I'd give my younger self as a young Sergeant, learn what taking care of people really means, don't be afraid of failure, be the subject matter expert in your field, understand doctrine and its role, and have integrity.

What Taking Care of People Really Means

Stop worrying about what's outside your sphere of influence and focus on what you can positively affect as a Soldier and leader inside your sphere. I struggled with this concept as a young leader (and sometimes still do) because I was so worried about what everyone else was doing, I'd lose focus on my own team's dynamics. But our two most valuable resources are our Soldiers and time. Any available time should be dedicated to some type of training. It doesn't matter if the time is allocated training time within the Unit Training Plan (UTP) schedule, the once regular Sergeant's Time Training (STT), or the elusive white space hip-pocket training. Not using every precious moment allocated to you as a leader is not taking care of your people. It fails them. It's potentially having to tell their family they didn't make it home from combat because you failed to prepare them properly. Unfortunately, I've seen firsthand what happens to underprepared units in combat. As a leader, you don't want that on your conscience. Remember what Gen. H. Norman Schwarzkopf once said, "The more you sweat in peace, the less you bleed in war" (1991).

Admittedly, I failed at this as a young sergeant. At times I was unsure of myself and was more concerned about liker-ship than leadership. I thought if I went easy on my guys, or took a day off, or blew off some training, that I was taking care of them and giving them more free time. I was failing them as a leader. I wasn't pushing myself or my team to improve. I wasn't preparing them for the combat looming in the very near future.

Most Soldiers don't want to sit around all day and stare at their phones, that's not why they joined the Army. During my time at Asymmetric Warfare Group (AWG) I've noted that Soldiers want challenging and stimulating

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training. They want to be pushed hard to see how far they can go and how good they really are or can become.

As leaders, it's our job to keep the training threshold at the appropriate level. AWG used the phrase threshold of learning which meant training needs to be adjusted to the unit level. If a unit succeeds easily, then difficulty should be increased. If a unit fails often, then difficulty should be decreased until the unit improves.

Ultimately, after several successes, and infinitely more failures, the greatest leadership wisdom I've learned is to constantly push your unit and your Soldiers to grow. I'm not their friend. I'm their leader. And I'll ensure every ounce of energy I have is dedicated to giving them the best possible chance of coming home alive from combat.

Fear of Failure

Over the years, the Army has developed a zero-defect culture which causes an issue known as ethical fading. The researchers and professors who coined the term consider ethical fading to be "the process by which the moral colors of an ethical decision fade into bleached hues that are void of moral implications" (2004, p. 2). Gerras and Wong examined the ethical fading concept in their studies on the Army culture with their article Lying to Ourselves: Dishonesty in the Army Profession (2015). Essentially, they say that over time the Army became desensitized to lies by rationalizing them as either no big deal or as little white lies. While some of the problem is that we're so busy we may feel compelled to falsely report things like readiness levels or qualification ratings, I would argue the issue is both a lack of integrity and fear of looking like a failure.

Fear of failing cuts deep into the core and psyche of a person with a zero-defect mindset and can be debilitating for a person and unit whose leader thinks like that. In her book, Mindset, the author believes people either have a fixed or growth mindset (2016). Simply put, people either embrace ambiguity and failure as an opportunity to challenge themselves and learn (growth), or they only perform well when conditions are to their liking and in areas they know they're already good at, and if they fail it's not their fault but someone or something else's (fixed). The Army currently has a fixed mindset (ATLDS, 2020). There is little room for units to create or explore or innovate without being labeled a failure.

For example, think back to your last platoon or company's live fire event. It was probably the same range and script it's been for years. Why? First, we like to go with what we know. Second, we lack the ability to develop training that's new and challenging. And forget about outside the box unconventional training. Third, we want to "take care of people" by ensuring their success. Finally, as leaders or lead planners, we don't want to look like failures if units underperform. So, we're going to place them in training and scenarios where we know they'll succeed. Sure, we're checking boxes, but are we pushing the unit and the Soldiers to reach their full potential? Are we developing new ways to grow, thrive, and learn? How can we create or innovate if we conduct the same training from the past two decades?

Look, I like winning and hate failure just as much as the next Soldier. When I was a young NCO, I hated failure because of my pride. I was always worried that if my team or I failed at something, then my leaders would think me incapable, and my subordinates would view me as incompetent. But looking back now, what I really needed to do was reach out to a mentor for help in overcoming whatever issue lay at hand. But reaching out and admitting I needed help was then (and some would argue still) viewed as a sign of weakness. Reaching out is a sign of strength and maturity. It took me a long time to realize this because I lacked humility when I was young-

Then 1st Sgt. Fenrick (left) and then 1st Sgt. Shalim Guzman Rodriguez (right) prepare for airborne operations in Anchorage, Alaska, as a part of the 1st Battalion, 501st Parachute Infantry Regiment, in 2017. Interestingly enough, as of 9 a.m. this morning (Oct. 21, 2022), Guzman is my new battalion command sergeant major. Guzman and I were platoon sergeants and first sergeants together in Alaska in the 1-501st PIR. We've been friends since 2014 and it just so happens I now serve as his operations sergeant major. Small world and even smaller Army.

er. My hubris wouldn't allow me to admit I was afraid, because fear was often seen as weakness.

To be fully honest, and to pave the way for honesty from others, I'll admit I was afraid before I went out on my first combat mission. I was afraid during my first enemy contact. And that fear is okay. That fear is healthy. And guess what took me twenty years to learn? Everyone is afraid at some point. Courage is not the absence of fear, but acknowledging the fear exists and accomplishing the mission anyway. But my fear was not just a fear of death, it was also the previously mentioned fear of failure. I was afraid of letting my team or family down.

But here's what I've learned, the people who matter in my life don't judge me by my failures. The people I love and respect, judge me if I quit. Whether I choose to lay down or get back up and dust myself off having learned a valuable lesson. I used to think being "great" meant I had to be perfect. Perfection is impossible. To keep things in perspective, Thomas Edison failed more than 1,000 times before he successfully invented the light bulb. Great leadership, therefore, is not about perfection, but about grit and determination.

Be the SME of Your Field

I wanted to be a Soldier for as long as I can remember, and even before that according to the stories my father told me. I'm tremendously proud of what I do and the nation I protect. However, when I was a young Soldier, I didn't fully understand what I was a part of and what my role in the Army was. I knew I was a warrior and a member of a team, but I failed to realize the bigger picture and that I was a part of a profession. To be a true professional, I needed to be the master of my craft. I needed to be a subject matter expert (SME) in my field.

Master Sgt. Fenrick after his graduation ceremony from the Sergeants Major Academy in June, 2017. Such a special day to share with my family who supported me over the past 20 years. They unconditionally love and support me which allows me to continue to serve and do the job I love. I am supported by my wife Chandra, and my kids Wesley, Samuel, and Allison.

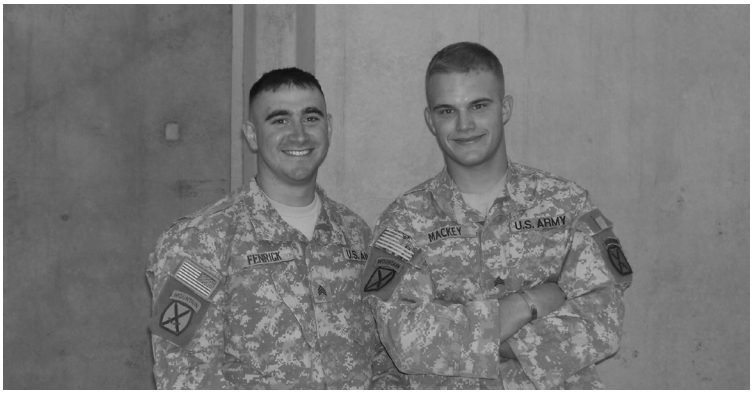
And here is a hard-earned and important lesson, being an SME takes consistent time and effort. Most consider special operation Soldiers like those in a Ranger Regiment, Special Forces, or Delta the best at what they do, but people often don't know or forget one important thing, special operators did not get where they are overnight. It took them years of hard work and dedication, and a lot of specialized training to get them to the pinnacle of their field. There are no shortcuts to becoming an SME. No matter what your MOS is, the Army needs you to be the best in your specialty. And the best way for young Soldiers to prepare themselves to become leaders and experts in their craft is to study doctrine.

Understand Doctrine and its Role

To be blunt, when I started on my young leadership ladder, I didn't even understand what doctrine was. I'm embarrassed to say this, but for the longest time I thought tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs) were the same thing as doctrine. Everyone always used the acronym TTP, but no one ever spoke of doctrine. I was learning how to react to contact, preparing ambushes, and room clearing procedures, but I had no idea doctrine guided all those things. I never saw or opened a manual (this was before the digital Army Publishing Directorate we now have). Despite all of this, I was continually rated as a 1-1 team leader and squad leader. It wasn't until I became a Ranger Instructor (RI) that I realized how far behind my peers I really was. Doctrinally speaking, I was dumb.

At the time, I was a senior staff sergeant training to certify as an instructor and there were so many things I didn't know or understand. All the other RIs seemed so smart when they spoke, and I was in a constant state of learning for my first three months. Finally, I asked one of the senior guys how he knew so much about everything, and he smiled and said, "It's all doctrine, brother." He showed me where I could find it myself. I then understood the saying RIs used, "you can lead a Ranger student to knowledge, but you can't make them think" (School of hard knocks, circa 2015). The saying was in reference to the Ranger Handbook students use during the course, but few rely on it when they can't find an answer to their problem. It was at this point the light bulb went on for me and I understood if I wanted to be the SME and a good leader, then I needed to know doctrine.

Little did I know this thirst for knowledge would lead me to become a lifelong learner in and out of the Army. I now genuinely enjoy learning new things and reading every day. I'm also no longer afraid to ask questions when I don't understand something. I always refer to doctrine when speaking and ask others where they found what they're speaking about. If it can't be tied to doctrine or regulation, then it's someone's opinion and needs to be verified by doctrine or trustworthy sources before being accepted. Doctrine helps build competence, and competence leads to confidence. Competence combined with confidence equals credibility. Credibility earns you a seat at the table and gives weight to your words.



Then Sgt. Fenrick (left) and Sgt. Tommy Mackey in 2007 at Camp Stryker, Iraq. Tommy and I were stationed together at Ft. Drum, with 2nd Battalion, 14th Infantry Regiment, 2nd Brigade. We were new to the unit and immediately hit it off and became friends, and we still talk regularly today. This picture reminds me of the hard times we faced over that 15-month deployment and of the good times we had after. Tommy has become family. Our brotherhood was forged in the sands of Iraq and the mountains of Afghanistan.

Integrity

Integrity is gained drop by drop but lost in buckets. Integrity is one of the few things we can control. I believe integrity is never lost, but rather given away. It's a choice. A lie or omission of the truth is still a lie and a choice. I humbly admit that as a young leader I compromised my integrity over a relatively minor infraction. When I was confronted by my superiors, I tried to act as if I had no idea what they were talking about. While I did not outright lie, I certainly did not tell the truth. I compromised my integrity and the truth eventually came to light, as it always does, and I was punished harshly for an offense that would have normally been a slap on the wrist because I chose to lie by omission.

For the longest time I was angry and bitter about this experience and felt I'd been wronged by my superiors and the system as young people often do. However, after years of reflection and chances from other leaders to prove myself, I now know I was in the wrong. I compromised my integrity in hopes of avoiding punishment for something I knew was wrong. That incident literally changed my life forever. I often think of that moment and wish I could go back and do it differently, but then I acknowledge that moment helped mold me into the leader I am today. I'm not defined by that moment, but it certainly taught me an incredibly valuable lesson. I was young and prideful and thought myself above the rules. Now, as a leader, I try my best to use integrity or ethical reasoning in my decisions. Senior leaders realize the importance of this more and more in today's information age. Nothing stays hidden for long, especially the truth.

Conclusion

Being a leader is not about coddling Soldiers. It's ensuring they're prepared to fight and win our Nation's wars. We need to develop demanding and realistic training as well as remove the fear of failure from our culture. How can we innovate and create if we're too scared to try new things? We must challenge and push ourselves outside our comfort zones to see what we're truly made of. Vital lessons are learned in failure as well as success.

Leaders should also have integrity and a thirst for knowledge and doctrine to guide their way. No Soldier ever said "Look at my Sergeant, he is great half of the time." You are either a professional Soldier and leader, or you're not. Be the role model your Soldiers and your family need.

I can't count the times I've failed as a Soldier, a leader, and a person, but I can tell you I am better today than I was yesterday because I never stop fighting to improve. So, if I could tell my younger self anything, it would be to keep fighting for what's right, hold the line, and give your best every day. The Army needs leaders who care and are passionate about their profession, their country, and Soldiers they lead. In the words of author, speaker, and pastor, John C. Maxwell, "People don't care how much you know, until they know how much you care" (2007, p. 158). ■

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