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Train for Your Worst Day

By Command Sgt. Maj. Jonathan E. Reffeor

3rd Infantry Division

The mark of a trusted leader reveals itself in the quiet yet powerful moments of a Soldier's career — whether it's being asked to pin a rank on a newly promoted Soldier or being the person someone turns to during their darkest hour.

Trust isn't just a virtue — it's a necessity. It's what binds Soldiers together and allows them to endure the unimaginable. Trust isn't built overnight. It's forged through shared effort, relentless preparation, and a commitment to mastering the basics. For Soldiers, trust transforms a collection of individuals into a cohesive team capable of facing the harshest realities of combat.

Building that trust begins with being brilliant at the basics. Consistent, quality physical training with your Soldiers — practicing how to shoot, move, and communicate together — ensures everyone in the squad is confident in their role. That shared foundation builds

the trust needed to prepare for the toughest days. It's that trust and training that got me through mine.

For me, that trust was proven when my platoon became a human wall, clearing the way for my medical evacuation after an enemy's attempt on our lives.

Preparation is Everything

Becoming a platoon sergeant at a young age was a daunting responsibility. As a staff sergeant, still non-promotable, I had a steep learning curve ahead of me. Fortunately, I had the support of strong squad leaders and a talented platoon leader who shared the belief that preparation was everything. Together, we fostered a culture of training and readiness. As an infantryman, you don't just hope for the best — you prepare for the worst. This deployment was riddled with worst-case scenarios.

We had a lot of injuries and lost some good

Soldiers during that time.

In Iraq, our deployment was fraught with challenges. The town of Hawija was a nightmare, heavily controlled by insurgents, rigged with improvised explosive devices (IEDs), and crawling with adversaries armed to the teeth. Despite the chaos, I knew my Soldiers needed to trust that I prioritized their safety above all else. I wasn't going to fail them.

An Ambush in Iraq

One day, we got a call of a possible IED on the outer side of Al-Awija. My platoon hit a heavily populated traffic circle as we approached the coordinates. Hidden among the crowd, insurgents launched grenades at my truck. The explosions ripped through the vehicle, injuring my driver, gunner, and me. In the aftermath, pain was irrelevant. Our sole focus was the wounded — ensuring their survival and safely extracting them from the danger zone.

Instinct took over, and our training kicked in. Every drill, every repetition had prepared us for this moment. My team executed medevac procedures like clockwork, guided by the trust and confidence we had built together. Even as our medic tended to my injuries, I demanded he prioritize our gunner's maimed knees — a decision that reflected the essence of leadership: placing others before yourself.

Later, as I was evacuated to a medical aid station, I witnessed the true power of trust. My platoon, battered but unwavering, formed a path to the aircraft that would transport me for further treatment. One by one, they shook my hand and assured me that my sacrifices — and theirs — were not in vain. At that moment, I realized that our shared trust and training had prepared us for that day and forged bonds that would last a lifetime.

Lessons Learned

The cohesive team we built, forged through relentless training and shared hardships, allowed us to endure that day. Trust is not something awarded by ceremony or certificate. It's crafted through repetition, through mastering the basics, and through the grit and grind of tough physical and tactical training done together.

Being the best squad leader, machine gunner, or Soldier in any role is about more than individual skill — it's about learning to shoot, move, and communicate as a team so that, when disaster strikes, every Soldier knows exactly what to do and trusts their comrades to do the same.

That trust, built over months or even years, prepares us for the worst days in combat — the days when instincts sharpened by training make all the



In the aftermath of an attack, every Soldier has a role — while medics treat the wounded, others hold security to protect the team. Every drill, every repetition prepares Soldiers and ensures the mission continues guided by the trust and confidence built together. (U.S. Army photo by Spc. Mariah Aguilar)



Platoon sergeants, supported by strong squad leaders, foster a culture of training and readiness. Being the best squad leader, machine gunner, or Soldier in any role is about more than individual skill — it's about learning to shoot, move, and communicate as a team so that, when disaster strikes, every Soldier knows exactly what to do and trusts their comrades to do the same. (U.S. Army photo by Spc. Rhema Eggleston)

difference between life and loss.

Those countless hours of preparation aren't just an investment in readiness. They are a lifeline for the Soldiers by your side. They ensure everyone has the strength and skill to make it home.

Training side by side — learning to shoot, move, and communicate as one — lays the foundation for a team that's ready for anything. Trust isn't just valuable. It's lifesaving. It's what prepared us for the worst day — and it's the reason I made it through mine. ■

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