



Leaders must ensure their Soldiers are prepared, trained, and equipped to meet any challenge in less-than-ideal conditions. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by Sgt. Lianne M. Hirano)

The Mountain Doesn't Care

By Retired Sgt. Maj. Cody J. Thomas

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The Army devoted much time and energy to my leader development, including formal and informal classes, counseling, and Professional Military Education (PME) courses. All these experiences led to a successful career, culminating in my retirement and becoming an instructor at the Sergeants Major Course. However, I attribute my success to my first squad leader and his focus on training and leader development.

Unit Culture

My first unit heavily emphasized leadership at the lowest level, empowering NCOs to lead platoons, sections, and teams. To my surprise, I was given responsibility for privates in my squad as a newly minted private first class. Ever present was my squad leader, who helped me

navigate my first exposure to Army leadership. I soon discovered leadership was inseparable from training.

Training

Our squad leader trained us hard — much harder than other NCOs trained their Soldiers. However, he didn't care what the others did. His Soldiers were his responsibility, and he went to great lengths to ensure he fulfilled his obligation.

Leaders too often justify releasing Soldiers early with the axiom “train to standard, not to time.” My squad leader didn't. Nor did he waste our time — he maximized it, using every moment and task as a training and developmental opportunity.

Gunnery, physical training, common task testing, and Sergeant's Time Training were all challenging

and rewarding. When we complained (and we all did) about how cold, wet, or hot it was, he shut it down immediately. He explained, “The mountain doesn’t care.”

He meant that we may need to operate in less-than-ideal conditions, and being unprepared only makes it harder. My squad leader’s mentality was — and I suspect has always been — supported by doctrine. As *Developing Leaders* (FM 6-22) states, “The Army develops adaptable leaders capable of accomplishing missions in dynamic, unstable, and complex environments” (Department of the Army [DA], 2022c, p. 1-1).

I came to appreciate that we were kept busy. More importantly, I realized the training was another indicator of my sergeant’s care of his Soldiers. He ensured we could climb the mountain — the dynamic, unstable, and complex environment noted earlier — and accomplish our objectives when we reached its summit. Sure, I occasionally stumbled on the climb. After all, I was a junior Soldier learning what it meant to be led and what it meant to lead.

Luckily, my squad leader, like the Army, understood that developing leaders comes with risk, which requires granting junior leaders time and space to learn from success and failure (DA, 2022c). By the time I was promoted to specialist, I had matured as a Soldier and leader. My squad leader didn’t have to explain to others why we trained so

hard — I did it for him. On my first deployment, I learned firsthand how crucial training truly is.

Deployment

My first deployment to Southwest Asia was in support of Operation Desert Storm’s Ceasefire Campaign. During the deployment, the battery was tasked with establishing a secondary position to occupy at least temporarily. While conducting the route reconnaissance to the secondary position, I led one of our two-vehicle recon elements. My squad leader led the other.

My element lost contact with the other convoy shortly after splitting up. My team arrived at the Objective Rally Point (ORP) first and waited for nearly half an hour. I had no way of knowing what happened to the other team, and we were too far from the battery to reach them via radio. (Later, we learned the other vehicle was in an accident.)

The only thing I knew for sure was the battery was counting on the site being ready when they arrived. I pulled my team together and let them know we would be moving in 15 minutes, with or without the other team members. We moved out alone shortly thereafter.

I didn’t realize it, but my squad leader’s training had already taken over. I didn’t panic. I came up with a plan and put it into action. Some complained about working so much harder with just half the team. Without thought,



Leadership is inseparable from training. Caring leaders develop adaptable Soldiers capable of accomplishing missions in dynamic, unstable, and complex situations. (U.S. Army photo by Pfc. Mariah Aguilar)



Soldiers assigned to 41st Field Artillery Brigade conduct first aid training during exercise Centaur Charge at the Grafenwoehr Training Area, Germany, Sept. 10, 2024. Training instills confidence, allowing Soldiers to act effectively despite the stress, chaos, uncertainty, and complexity of combat. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Cody Nelson)

I responded: “Hey, guys, the mountain doesn’t care. The battery’s counting on us. We have to get it done.”

Shaking my head and quietly cursing and praising my squad leader for all he had done to develop me, I led us through our occupation drill. We did the best we could with half the team. Part of me still believed that my squad leader’s mantra was just that: his catchphrase we heard so often. However, that would quickly change.

The Mountain Really Doesn’t Care

It soon became clear the mountain truly doesn’t care. It didn’t matter I was “just” a specialist. It didn’t matter I was in charge for the first time without any backup. I was soon going to have to make potentially life-or-death decisions, whether I was prepared or not.

While setting up the fourth launcher position, my friend collapsed on the way to the truck. I began treating him, following the training drilled into me by my sergeant.

My friend appeared to be suffering from heat stroke, so I loaded him into the truck and raced to the other members of my small team. As silly as it sounds, I heard my squad leader say, “Think, Thomas. What do you have on hand? What are you going to do?”

We pulled out a sleeping bag and lined it with our ponchos and trash bags, attempting to make it

waterproof. We then placed our battle buddy into the bag and added the little ice and cool water we had. I still don’t know if that was the right call, but it was the only plan I could devise to try and bring down his core temperature.

Ultimately, we got our casualty to care approximately 45 minutes away. (He made a full recovery.) At the same time, the remainder of my team prioritized the tasks they could complete before the unit arrived at the secondary location. The lessons from this experience shaped the rest of my career.

Lessons Learned

Tough, realistic, constant training is indispensable

No Soldier can prepare for every possible scenario they may encounter. Training is the one thing we can do to help bridge that gap. Leaders must understand there isn’t a firm distinction between training and leader development. The synergy of these tasks provides the best opportunity for junior leaders to learn and grow (DA, 2024).

Training instills confidence, allowing Soldiers to act effectively (eventually, almost instinctively) despite the “stress, chaos, uncertainty, and complexity of combat” (DA, 2024, p. 10).

Training as you fight is difficult, taking time to plan,

rehearse, and execute. However, these upfront costs are nothing compared to those incurred by sending untrained Soldiers into combat. Had I not been well trained in first aid, map reading, and land navigation, for example, our heat casualty would likely not have fully recovered or even survived.

The Warrior Ethos is a byproduct of training

Large-Scale Combat Operations (LSCO) will test our commitment to the Warrior Ethos. Junior leaders, and likely junior Soldiers, will be thrust into leadership roles they hadn't anticipated — yet they will be expected to do what is right regardless of the circumstance.

The Warrior Ethos is sustained and developed “through discipline, commitment, and pride” (DA, 2013, p. 1-1) and during the continual training and leader development activities at the small unit level.

This approach provides Soldiers the necessary skills, stamina, discipline, and fortitude to move beyond merely memorizing the Soldier's Creed. So, when conditions are at their worst and the Army needs its Soldiers at their best, they live the Warrior Ethos contained within: “I will always place the mission first. I will never accept defeat. I will never quit. I will never leave a fallen comrade” (DA, 2013, p. 1-1).

The mountain doesn't care

We can view the “mountain” as many things. Certainly, it encompasses all METT-TC variables (mission, enemy, terrain, troops available, time, civilian considerations, and informal considerations) (DA, 2022b, p. 9-6).

The mountain also equates to readiness, including those areas measured in the Commander's Unit Status Report (personnel, equipment and supplies on hand, equipment readiness/serviceability, and training proficiency) (DA, 2022a) and all the domains of Holistic Health and Fitness (physical, spiritual,

mental, sleep, and nutritional) (DA, 2020a).

The mountain doesn't care if you're unprepared, untrained, or ill-equipped to meet the demands placed upon you. Nor does it care if you neglected your assigned equipment's maintenance and service.

Training = caring = leadership

This event guided me as a leader from that day forward. I took the same training and leadership philosophy my first squad leader instilled and applied it

to how I led all my Soldiers. When they asked why we were training when others had left, I gave them my squad leader's response: We hadn't met the standard yet.

I can't count the times I used this experience to inculcate the importance of training and leader development to those around me. Soldiers, NCOs, officers, and cadets have all heard this story and — I hope — taken it to heart.



Soldiers with the 7th Army Training Command do a map check at the Joint Multinational Readiness Center, Hohenfels, Germany, on June 17, 2020. Proper training in map reading and land navigation is essential for Soldiers to succeed in any challenging environment. (U.S. Army Photo by Pfc. Zachary Bouvier)

Conclusion

Throughout this experience (and my career), I relied on the training, mentorship, and development my squad

leader provided me before my first deployment. I continued the mission, making decisions and reacting to situations as they arose. All this occurred without me having to waste time thinking about it.

I had doubts and was afraid. However, the training I received instilled enough confidence in me to act effectively.

Every NCO has two basic responsibilities: mission accomplishment and Soldier welfare (DA, 2020b). My first squad leader taught me what taking care of Soldiers meant, and experience taught me that you cannot accomplish the mission without doing so.

Let me be clear: The sergeant I am referring to wasn't the first NCO in charge of me when I arrived at my unit. However, he was unequivocally my first leader. So, while the mountain may not care, a good leader does. ■

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