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Don't Wait: Any day could be the next Sept. 10, 2001

By SEA John T. Raines III

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"I am an American, fighting in the forces which guard my country and our way of life. I am prepared to give my life in their defense."

— Executive Order, 1988

Being a professional means being able to conduct honest assessments of yourself, your element, and those you lead. I conducted one of these self-assessments on the morning of Sept. 11, 2001, and the answer to it was clear.

Like most Guard Soldiers, I was at work on that early summer morning. I served about nine years in the regular Army, transitioned out in December 1997, and began my new career as a firefighter in my hometown. My shift had me working Sept. 10 and getting

off at 8 a.m. the next day. A few minutes before roll call, the first plane flew into the World Trade Center and changed my life forever. This was the moment I conducted an honest personal assessment of myself and my responsibilities as an Army leader.

I was a good Soldier and could perform my duties with the best. If I hadn't had nine years of development as a Soldier and NCO, I may have come away with a different answer to my self-assessment. However, great NCOs and officers had mentored me in my short career, and I knew the difference between being a good Soldier and a good leader.

Being a good Soldier meant that I was in great physical shape, looked and spoke like a professional in and out of uniform, was an expert with all my weapon systems, and could perform all my warrior tasks to an expert level. I was a model Soldier, having been selected as Alabama's NCO of the Year and received the Governor's Award for the Outstanding Enlisted Member of the Year. By all accounts, I would have been assessed as a great Soldier and NCO. Why were they all wrong?

What does it mean to be a good NCO? Where is this defined? Do we really get assessed on being a good NCO?

You can research and find these answers, but everyone must answer these questions individually and honestly. It isn't enough to *know* the correct answers. You must live them out. Sitting at Station 6 on Sept. 11, I knew the answers, yet I was not living up to my responsibility as an Army leader. It took seeing that horrific event unfold and realizing that our country and way of life were suddenly under attack. I knew we were at war and that my element would be called on to perform its inherent Soldier duties.

As all these questions ran through my soul that morning, I already knew the answer. I was the worst kind of NCO and had been for several years.

I waited for instructions and guidance.

I didn't take the time to know my Soldiers, personally or professionally.

I looked for ways and excuses not to come to drill.

I accepted the status quo of an NCO's administrative and training responsibilities.

My big problem was that I got comfortable outsourcing my duties to others, such as the full-time staff. If they didn't do my duties, I was also OK with that.

I was good at doing nothing and didn't care enough to give it much thought. My mind was on raising children and making the paycheck from my civilian job last until the end of the month.

I was worse than the NCOs who hadn't been properly trained, those who didn't have the same potential, and those who didn't know right from wrong. I knew what my duties entailed and had all the potential in the world. I led squads and platoons on numerous readiness exercises around the world and had done the same at countless Combat Training Center (CTC) rotations. I was mentored by some of the best NCOs in our Army.

There was no excuse. I knew I had been derelict in my duties, and I knew this could and would result in Soldiers being unable to complete their missions. Even worse, my lack of action could result in Soldiers not coming home. As I sat watching fellow Americans jump to their deaths from the World Trade Center, I decided never to waste another opportunity to train Soldiers. The consequences of not doing so were far too great.

Good NCOs give our elements a distinct advantage on the battlefield. Still, our role in day-to-day training sets us apart from all armies throughout the world and throughout history. We don't say we don't have time, we don't have the resources, we don't have guidance, or we are short on people. It doesn't matter what someone else's element is doing or not doing. It doesn't matter what we feel like on a given day. No excuses accepted! We take account of what we have,



Soldiers survey the damage following the terrorist attack on the Twin Towers in New York City Sept. 11, 2001. Because any day could be another Sept. 11, NCOs should take the time to know their Soldiers, take the initiative, and avoid excuses. Don't outsource your duties or be good at doing nothing. (Photo courtesy Department of Defense)

we train, and then we train some more.

If you allow complacency to creep in and excuses to rule the day, you're setting yourself up for a brutal self-assessment like the one I conducted on Sept. 11. I decided that Sept. 10 would be the last day

of my career. I assessed myself as a "NO GO" in meeting my leadership responsibilities.

How will you evaluate yourself when the next 9/11 event takes place? Any day could be your Sept. 10. Make it count, and don't make the mistake I did. ■

References

Executive Order 10631. (1955). As amended by EO 11382

(1967) and EO 12633 (1988). *Code of Conduct*.

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