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Fear and Loathing in the Barracks – And the Heart of Leadership

LARRY H. INGRAHAM

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The smart guys have taken the United States Army about as far as we can go with respect to weapon systems that bust up things and hurt people. The next advance in creating a more effective army will be done with people. People require leadership. That's what worries me, and lots of others.

The Army is now in the throes of a blizzard of memos, manuals, and pamphlets on leadership. But they miss the point. What gets left out is the heart of leadership, which cannot be taught from the platform. To make you understand what I'm talking about, I have to tell you a story told to me by some wise old NCOs who understood the heart of leadership, and how we lost it.¹

Once upon a time, long ago, there was an army. It was a pretty good army, too, by world standards. One day it got committed to the jungles of Southeast Asia. It was committed with an unclear mission by a commander-in-chief who hoped to wage a major war without pain to his people. He therefore refused to call up the reserves. To further reduce pain he agreed to a 12-month rotation and increasingly heavy draft calls. Within five years the Army was bloated on rapid promotions. Repeated tours wore down the NCO corps, adding the burned-out to the killed and the wounded. But the war continued. Draft standards were lowered to spare the sons of the middle class. Project 100,000 scraped the bottom of the nation's poor and disadvantaged to man that once-magnificent army.

Many dedicated NCOs and officers tried to carry on, but the task became increasingly difficult. War protests eroded essential civilian support for the war, and soldiers became "pigs" to their fellow citizens. Racial violence flared throughout the country and spilled over into the Army. Drug use permeated both civilian and military sectors. And, on top of all of this, the legal system of the country took a sharp turn in support of individual rights over collective obligations. Charlie Company refused to move out when ordered. Discipline broke. The army and the nation trembled in disgust and

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frustration at revelations of atrocities symbolized by My Lai. Senior officers looked the other way. The war continued.

The 12-month rotation cycle worked reasonably well, except for one small problem—the Army quickly ran out of junior NCOs. Developing sergeants takes time. More time than 12 months. The Army tried to solve the problem by school-training junior NCOs, who were derisively called "shake and bakes." The scorn was not altogether deserved. They were well-trained at school, and got a few months jump on learning to be a sergeant in the jungle. Unfortunately, while they knew how to lay a Claymore, they often had trouble getting others to follow their example. Telling somebody else where to go and what to do (and having them respect you for it)—that's something you don't learn in any school. You have to learn by watching somebody with the knack and then trying to copy. Well you can imagine the time those NCOs had when all hell broke loose in the Army, when discipline collapsed, and when nobody could tell anybody anything.

Those were times when many NCOs and officers were more afraid of their own troops than the enemy. Those were days of fraggings, and of racial protests on the commanding general's front lawn. Those were days when in some units in Germany no officer or NCO dared go above the first floor of the barracks. Those were days of hassling over haircuts, of confiscating drugs only to be told the seizure was illegal, and of being verbally assaulted as a "lifer" for giving a legitimate order.

When the war finally ended, the Army was in damn sorry shape. It was combat ineffective throughout the world. It was morally rotten. The jungle massacres were bad enough, but on top of that the Sergeant Major of the Army and the Provost Marshal General so much as admitted to being crooks. Oh, it looked like an army on the outside, but inside it was hollow. All the depots had been picked clean, operations and maintenance funds diverted, and serious unit training eliminated. What was left of the Army sat in ratty facilities maintaining worn out equipment, with no funds to practice being an army with.

Many experienced senior NCOs quit in disgust at what had become of the Army they had grown up in. The Army they loved lay in shambles around them, a paper model of its former self. They quit for many reasons. The end of the draft reduced the pay differentials between privates and sergeants. The "New Volunteer Army" marched to the tune, "The Army Wants to Join You." It seemed like the privates got every benefit, everything but standards and discipline.

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Others quit because their work had been contracted out to civilians during the war. Others found the MOS reclassifications difficult to swallow, while still others found it more profitable to retire than to continue to serve. They left with heavy hearts. The spirit of their army was gone. And with them went not man-years, but man-centuries of experience.

These centuries of experience included an understanding of the difference between recruit billets and the barracks of real soldiers; how to inspect a mess hall; drill ceremonies for fun; full field layouts; little pocket books with personal data on each soldier; how to housebreak lieutenants so you could show them off in company as captains; how to teach and how to train; when to joke and when to growl; and, most important, how to love soldiers and the Army.

The NCOs who stayed to put the Army back together again had a hell of a job on their hands. Remember, too, that they were comparatively inexperienced. They had gone to the jungle, done well, been promoted fast, and returned home. But they didn't know all the tricks of the old sergeants. Why, some of them couldn't march a squad to the motor pool when the formation was directly outside the gate! Sure, they could lay down indirect fires in the jungle, but nobody had shown them how to keep floor buffers operational in garrison ("You gotta teach 'em not to snap that long cord or it'll rip the socket right outta the wall and ruin the plug, too").

To make matters worse, the officer corps lost confidence in the NCO corps, and blamed it directly for all the trouble. It didn't seem like things could possibly get any more confusing and discouraging. But they did. The Army in its wisdom put male and female soldiers in the same barracks. Sometimes with only a week's notice and no guidance other than "do it," the NCOs had to sort out latrine and shower facilities, kitchens and sewing machines, visitation and inspection policies. It was bad enough getting the men to make their beds and keep the place looking like an army barracks, but allowing teddy bears and bedspreads was going too far!

So the Army up and did something smart. If NCOs could be school-trained for the jungle, then they ought to be school-trained for garrison, too. From that little insight grew a whole new concept in developing noncommissioned officers, the Noncommissioned Officers Education System. Slowly, painfully over the years, with the help of the remaining senior NCOs who remembered how a good army was put together, the young pups learned the technical skills required. Schools are good for teaching technical how-to's, and the young sergeants took the opportunity and ran with it.

There was one important thing, however, that the schools either didn't or couldn't teach. That was the heart of leadership. Caring for soldiers was an aspect of leadership the schools weren't very good at teaching. They taught sergeants to record birthdays, but they didn't teach them why. The old sergeants knew the value of greeting a private,

“So, Smitty, how does it feel to be 19

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today?” And they knew how to arrange for a steak at the mess hall. They knew this because these things happened to them when they were 19. The schools taught how to inspect a wall locker, but not how to sit on a footlocker and get a soldier to pour out his heartache. The schools taught about caring for soldiers, but nobody said that meant caring for their wives and kids, too. And the schools never mentioned a sergeant getting his goof-offs out of jail in the middle of the night, for no other reason than that he was responsible for them. Good or bad, for better or for worse, they were their sergeant’s responsibility. These things are not learned from the platform; they must be learned from example in the school of hard knocks, with demonstration, imitation, practice, and critique being the key ingredients. The old sergeants knew there was no limit to what they could ask of soldiers when there were no limits to NCO concern for their troops. But too many old sergeants were gone.

There was all that rah-rah stuff about teamwork, morale, and esprit that was taught in school. The words were right, but the rhythm was wrong. Again, these things had to be experienced coming up before they could be practiced going down. Oh sure, some of the old timers remembered how competition could make even the most disagreeable work seem tolerable. Those old first shirts could set one platoon against another until it looked like they’d destroy each other, but just in the nick of time they’d set them all against the company next door. The old-timers also knew they were players on the team, not just coaches on the sidelines. They could manage a drink with the guys, or even a poker game, without compromising their authority. They too could have fun at unit socials, because both work and play were just different aspects of family life. The youngsters who grew up in the jungle, especially after 1969, seemed to forget, or not to have understood to begin with. The only lesson they seemed to bring home was to be an adversary of their own soldiers. They weren’t dumb. They were inexperienced. And the times were against them.

Remember the difference between laying the Claymore yourself and ensuring somebody else did it right? The same thing happened in garrison. The senior sergeants didn’t have much time to teach their juniors a patient, caring, coaching leadership style. They had to act fast. They taught the shortcut, the “Poor Protoplasm Theory of Leadership.” The troops were just no damn good; the only solution was to kick ass and take names, yell and holler, be strict and arbitrary, even capricious, if necessary—whatever it took to maintain authority and discipline.

Back in the early ’70s, when the Army was flat on its back, sergeants had a real enemy, all right: their own soldiers. The difference between an army and a mob is discipline. The first order of business amid the racial incidents, drug use, and thuggery was to reestablish good order and discipline. They succeeded, too, with the tried and true ways that scared leaders always use: social distance and the whip. NCOs despised privates as dirtballs and scumbags because they feared them. They whipped them with chickenshit inspections,

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extra duties, expeditious discharges, and both judicial and nonjudicial punishments. They sought additional administrative ways to get rid of the riffraff. And, by golly, they got their soldiers’ attention. They surely did, and the Army knew discipline once more.

Those who brought the Army back from chaos have a lot to be proud of, and their country owes them a debt that will never be acknowledged. But the Army paid dearly for the restoration of discipline. In the process, something happened to the noncommissioned officer corps and the officer corps, something that grew more worrisome the more healthy the Army appeared.

Previously the NCOs had always prided themselves in making the Army work, despite their officers. Now they started picking up all the bad habits of the officer corps. They weren’t sure enough of their own authority to talk to either their soldiers or their officers. They talked only to each other, mostly about their insecurities (but of course they didn’t use that term). They said they were “professionals” (which nobody who ever knew the Army ever doubted for a minute), but they confused professionalism with status symbols like office furniture and having a tactical vehicle. They equated school learning with professional competence, but sometimes a little learning *is* a dangerous thing. They became

obsessed with whistle-clean efficiency reports required by centralized promotion boards.

Saddest of all, when they stopped talking to their soldiers, unwritten rules got set. Rules like, “professionals” don’t drink a beer with the unit after work. And “professionals” don’t have the unit over to the house for a cookout, because that’s fraternization. “Professionals” attend to the barracks, because that’s where the rater looks, but pay no mind to where married soldiers live. “Professionals” leave work at a reasonable hour, but the junior NCOs and privates stay until the work is finished. Scheming to give soldiers time off just isn’t “professional.” Since a “professional” tells other people what to do, he has to maintain a sharp image; “professionals” don’t have to get their hands dirty any more. A “professional” is loyal and never laughs at the turkeys at headquarters (especially if he hopes to be a turkey himself, someday!). A “professional” doesn’t laugh much at all; soldiering is serious business. If “professionals” laugh at all, it’s at the expense of the troops, not the officers or the crazy Army bureaucracy.

It’s not the fault of the NCOs, really. It’s not the fault of the officer corps. It’s not the system’s fault, either. It’s nobody’s fault, at least nobody who’s identifiable and still around. Things just turned out that way. Not all NCOs turned “professional.” The Sergeant Morales Club represents NCOs who were nurtured in the old ways.² Many of the other sergeants we see now weren’t so fortunate, for whatever reasons, to have had superb role models. They are good products considering their times and circumstances. But they may not be good enough for war.

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They grew up fearing their troops; in war they must trust them. They grew up despising their soldiers; in war they must love them. They grew up whipping the unit into shape; in war they must lead it. They grew up commanding respect; in war they must command devotion. They grew up keeping their distance and maintaining their proper place; in war they must hold the hands of the uncertain, cradle the anguished, and change the underwear of the scared, all without a second thought, because they’re all family.

In the long march back from the days of the mutinous mob, the Army got confused about intimacy and authority, maybe for good reasons at the time. Leaders saw intimacy and authority as opposites and incompatible. They confused camaraderie with fraternization, equal opportunity with coed living, training-by-example with instruction from the podium, and soldierly irreverence with insubordination. They assumed social relations with their soldiers should be different in garrison than in combat. Maybe they’re right. Maybe everything will be different in combat. Maybe the troops will come together when the fighting starts, just like they were supposed to in the jungle, before Charlie Company said, “We won’t go.” Maybe it’s all bull that as an army practices in peace so will it perform in war. Maybe. I hope so for the sake of the Army and the Republic. But, maybe it’s not all bull.

I wish this story had a happy ending, but it has no ending at all. The story is still being written, unfortunately by NCOs and officers who grew up in an army that lacked heart. If you doubt me, look at the way we act in our leader training schools, not at what we say. We fail to teach the heart of leadership as the old-timers understood it, in terms of the four Cs: Competence, Candor, Compassion, and Commitment. That is the heart of leadership. I send my young NCOs to school. They learn to buff floors, but not to build cohesion. They learn to file counseling statements, but not to console a troop in the face of a “Dear John” or a dead buddy. They learn to instill fear, but not to inspire affection.

The head learns from the platform, but the heart learns from practice. We have forgotten the heart in our leadership training. The Army once knew how to teach that kind of leadership, and how to grow sergeants and officers who could practice it. Maybe the Army could teach that kind of leadership again, while there’s still time, before it’s too late.

NOTES

1. This article is based on the “NCO Career Histories Project,” funded by the US Army Medical Research and Development Command. The project included some 500 hours of interviewing 20 senior noncommissioned officers.

2. The Sergeant Morales Club, open only to NCOs who demonstrate exemplary professionalism, originated in Europe several years ago. Each club nominee goes before a board of five to seven command sergeants major, who examine the nominee’s record, appearance, and conformity to the Morales ideal, epitomized by an NCO’s dedicated attention to

the needs of his soldiers throughout the 24-hour day (“Focus on People.” *Soldiers*, 41 [October 1986], 26).

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Reviewed 23 October 2002. Please send comments or corrections to carl_Parameters@conus.army.mil