



*CPT Gary Klein, B Troop, 1st Squadron, 33rd Cavalry Regiment, 3rd Brigade Combat Team, 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault), scans ridgelines with his M4 rifle in Khowst Province, Afghanistan, where he commanded a police combined action team, a human intelligence team and two of his platoons from this hilltop.*

# Reflections on Combat Leadership:

**C**yclic transition—the “sine wave,” if you will—has defined the Army’s experience throughout its history. As hard as the period since 9/11 has been, the Army was well-funded, well-equipped and well-staffed. Those days are ending now, as they did in the mid-90s, the mid-70s, the late 1940s and the 1920s. Very soon we may see end strength, budgets, new equipment fielding and much more begin to dry up. The Air Force and Navy are likely to become the preferred services again, along with U.S. Special Operations Command, and the Army may once again become a bit of a stepsister.

This will be hard on morale and on commanders, who will be asked to do more with less and call it smart (code for doing less with less). We may hear that we will never do counterinsurgency again, or that state-on-state conflict is so unlikely that we don’t really need to train or be ready as before. The Army leadership won’t say that, but plenty of others will, either directly or indirectly.

That’s OK. As we know, it’s the historical pattern and we shouldn’t be surprised, but here’s the point: We don’t have

an Army for when things go right. We have one for when things go wrong, and I guarantee that sooner or later, things will go wrong again. When that happens, no one will care if commanders are undermanned, don’t have the resources to train, or have equipment that is old or poorly maintained due to lack of spare parts. Like the poor soldiers with Task Force Smith in Korea, they’ll just be told to get on the plane and go. If that happens—when that happens—what can we rely on?

First, we can rely on ourselves. We didn’t get here by accident. We’re here because we’re good, very good. We’re better by far than anyone the other side can show. Build on the trust and confidence you find and invest in those friendships. It’s the right thing to do, and it will stand you in good stead. When your peers ask for help, your answer should always be “Yes!” You’ll find they will do the same.

Second, we can rely on our troopers. I found that the longer I stayed in the service, the clearer things seemed to be. Physically fit, disciplined small units that can hit what they shoot at will usually win. We win by powering down,

teaching subordinates to make decisions within our intent, making decisions, underwriting their honest mistakes, focusing on fundamentals, ruthlessly purging the less important and getting after the most important. Here's the counterintuitive part: We do that by staying out of their way and concentrating on those few decisions that only the commander can make.

For some, that may be hard. I imagine some commanders may think, "Right. I didn't become a battalion or brigade commander to stay out of the way." If we've done our job right, however, half the game is letting the small units do their thing, without over-control and excessive supervision. If we can do that, our subordinate leaders, soldiers and units are empowered.

Third, we can rely on our values and core beliefs, which should be one and the same as the great Army we all serve. I wore a uniform for 36 years, and for me, "Duty, Honor, Country" was all I ever needed. You may express, articulate or internalize our Army values in a slightly different way, but it doesn't really matter because without being told, we all know right and wrong in the context of our chosen profession. We know that lying, cheating and stealing are always wrong, and that little sins very soon grow into big ones. We know that taking care of soldiers is not just a tired old bumper sticker but a sacred responsibility that we must live—and be seen to live—every day. This doesn't mean coddling soldiers but caring for them.

Every soldier deserves dignity and respect. Commanders can be tough on their men. They can even lose their tem-

peraments. Commanders are like me. They think about soldiers they've lost: "If I'd done this, or if I'd done that, PFC Smith or SGT Jones would still be with us." That kind of introspection is healthy and appropriate because with every soldier they lose, they lose a small piece of themselves, too. That's a burden of command we don't talk about too much, but it's one we carry every day of our lives.

**A**t some point, however, a successful commander must let that go. In Field Marshal William Slim's classic book, *Defeat Into Victory: Battling Japan in Burma and India, 1942–1945*, he writes about generalship, but his words are just as much about command in combat. Slim took command of the British 14th Army in Burma when it had known only defeat. Ultimately, however, he turned things around. His words are both helpful and encouraging:

The only test of generalship is success, and I had succeeded in nothing I had attempted. ... The soldier may comfort himself with the thought that, whatever the result, he has done his duty faithfully and steadfastly, but the commander has failed in his duty if he has not won victory—for that is his duty. He has no other comparable to it. He will go over in his mind the events of the campaign. "Here," he will think, "I went wrong; here I took counsel of my fears when I should have been bold; there I should have waited to gather strength, not struck piecemeal; at such a moment I failed to grasp opportunity when it was presented to me." He will remember the soldiers whom he sent into the attack that failed and who did not come back.

# Advice for Commanders

By COL Richard D. Hooker Jr.  
U.S. Army retired

per now and then, but what they can't do is insult, belittle or humiliate them. They can't let their subordinates do it either. That's never right.

Commanders sign what has been called a contract of unlimited liability. That contract commits them and every one of their soldiers to fight and, if need be, to die together. As a young lieutenant I came across the following quotation, which has meant a lot to me:

A dead soldier who has given his life because of the failure of his leader is a dreadful sight before God. Like all dead soldiers, he was tired ... and possibly frightened to his soul, and there he is on top of all that, never again to see his homeland. Don't be the one who failed to instruct him properly, who failed to lead him well. Burn the midnight oil, so that you may not in later years look upon your hands and find his blood still red upon them.

That passage speaks more clearly about what caring for soldiers really means than any I know. I imagine that many

of them will recall the look in the eyes of men who trusted him. "I have failed them," he will say to himself, "and failed my country!" He will see himself for what he is—a defeated general. In a dark hour he will turn in upon himself and question the very foundations of his leadership and his manhood.

And then he must stop! For if he is ever to command in battle again, he must shake off these regrets, and stamp on them, as they claw at his will and his self-confidence. He must beat off these attacks he delivers against himself, and cast out the doubts born of failure. Forget them, and remember only the lessons to be learned from defeat—they are more than from victory.

This was a commander who had been through the fire in a very dark hour and came to be widely regarded as the best and most successful British general of World War II. His very words connote the character of the man.

Inherently, we know that leadership and command are about selfless service. On the day he became the Chairman of



*Courage is rightly esteemed the first of human qualities because it is the quality which guarantees all others.*

—Winston Churchill

the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Hugh Shelton said, “To lead is to serve—nothing more, nothing less,” and he was surely right.

Finally, to successfully command takes courage. Winston Churchill once said that courage is the first of human qualities because it guarantees all the rest. He knew what he was talking about. By the time he was 25, he had served in five campaigns and participated in the last great cavalry charge in British history at the Battle of Omdurman, where he personally killed several enemy soldiers in hand-to-hand combat. The requirement to be willing to confront danger is so much a part of command that we almost forget it, but we surely can’t escape it.

Although Ulysses S. Grant is well-known, most people probably have never heard of Charles F. Smith, commandant of cadets at West Point when Grant was a plebe. He was far older and a Regular Army career officer when the Civil War broke out. He became a general officer, but somehow he ended up under Grant in the early days of the war, an embarrassing thing for Grant made easier by Smith’s loyalty, dignity and professionalism. Unfortunately, Smith died early in the war, but not before making a profound impression on Grant.

Although the boss, Grant considered Smith a mentor, as he surely was. Not yet tested in battle or command, he asked Smith for advice. Smith once said, “Battle is the ultimate to which the whole life’s labor of an officer should be

directed. He may live to the age of retirement without seeing a battle; still, he must always be getting ready for it as if he knew the hour and the day it is to break upon him. And then, whether it come late or early, he must be willing to fight—he must fight.”

Commanders will bring up another new generation of leaders and future commanders, and whatever else they think they should be doing, one thing is paramount: They “must be willing to fight.” In my experience, which spans some five combat tours, many of our leaders are willing to fight. Some actually enjoy it. A few can’t or won’t, and in a service whose motto is “This we’ll defend,” that just can’t be.

That brings me to the other kind of courage: moral courage. Physical and moral courage are different things. Plenty of commanders are physically brave but lack moral courage, what has been called three o’clock in the morning courage. This kind of courage lies at the very heart of command. It takes moral courage to look a young man in the eye and say, “I’m sorry, but you have to go.” It takes moral courage to send troops into combat in full knowledge that some likely will not come back. It takes moral courage to look a superior in the eye and say, “I’m sorry, sir, but that is wrong, and I can’t be a part of it.” It takes moral courage to make a decision when everything is at stake and then assume full responsibility for it, whatever the outcome.

This is the real test and the real burden of command. This is why only the very few are called to command, particularly in the maneuver arms, with its special task to engage the enemy directly in combat. There can be no more challenging or rewarding task and none more satisfying to the professional soldier.

Every so often, an Army commander fails badly, and that failure is a stain on the whole profession. When one fails, the accomplishments of a hundred great ones are forgotten, and we pay a very heavy price. For example, in 2011, two Army brigade commanders in Europe were relieved for moral and ethical failures, and earlier, in both Iraq and

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*COL Richard D. Hooker Jr., USA Ret., Ph.D., entered the Army in 1975 as a rifleman in the 82nd Airborne Division and retired as an infantry colonel in 2010. He is deputy commandant and dean of the NATO Defense College. His service included tours in Grenada, Somalia, Rwanda, Bosnia, Kosovo, the Sinai, Iraq and Afghanistan. He also served in the offices of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the Secretary of the Army and the Chief of Staff of the Army. A graduate of the U.S. Military Academy, he has master’s and doctoral degrees in international relations from the University of Virginia.*

Afghanistan, commanders were fired for similar offenses. In some cases, they let their units get out of control, and some awful crimes were committed by American soldiers under their command.

**N**ot so long ago in Iraq, a brigade commander lost a number of men to accidental deaths in one tour. That commander was a card-carrying member of the “stuff happens” school of leadership. In another incident during my tour in Afghanistan, a mine-resistant ambush protected vehicle rolled over on a mountainside in Wardak Province in the middle of the night. I remember it because my son was a machine gunner riding in that vehicle. The driver was unlicensed and untrained, the route had never been “reconned” in daylight, and the unit failed to report the incident to higher. No one was killed, but the accident shut down the operation and the vehicle was lost for weeks while it was being repaired.

Is this the business of a battalion or brigade commander? Yes, absolutely. A clear standard—firmly enforced, with subordinate commanders and leaders clearly held accountable—creates a command climate that can reduce such incidents to an absolute minimum. We know this because other commanders led under the same conditions and lost very few or even none. The difference was the core values of the commanders concerned. The good ones wanted to bring back as many troopers as they could, and they stayed up late working on safety and accountability.

To switch gears just a bit, many officers began their careers in a combat training center, Desert Storm Army. Things like movement to contact, priorities of work in the defense, echelon of fires, and breaching drills were second nature to them. Then the world changed. We began to focus on Haiti and the Balkans. Then 9/11 came along, and we found ourselves drawn into a different world, with different tactics, techniques and procedures; different doctrine; and a different operating environment.

Now the pendulum is swinging back. The new buzzword is *full spectrum operations*, and the Army will have to regain that high level of proficiency it once had in high-intensity combat. Company grades, and even some field grades, may be combat-experienced, but they aren’t grounded in these high-end skills. We’ve lost a lot in the past decade as we were forced to focus on counterinsurgency. Hopefully what we learned will remain in the toolbox, but now it’s time to regain what we’ve lost.

Here, our vast experience will pay huge dividends. We must not wait. None of us can know whether tomorrow or the next day America might be at war in Korea or the Middle East. If that day ever comes, there won’t be time to get better on the way to the airfield. Like all wars, it will be “come as you are.”

Commanders make decisions and give guidance. If they’re spending large chunks of time preparing briefings, poking around trash cans, sending emails to their subordinates, or doing things other than making decisions and giving guidance, they may not be focused on the right things.

Good commanders do something else. They are adept at reducing complicated things to simple things. For example, in Iraq we faced a Byzantine operating environment composed of terrorists, insurgents, Sunni, Shia, criminal elements and sometimes just tribal elements angry over a real—or perceived—insult.

Then-Lt. Gen. Graeme Lamb of the British Army arrived in 2006 as a civilian advisor to Multinational Force-Iraq and said, “We’re thinking about this wrong. ... It seems to me there are reconcilables and irreconcilables. We should bend all our efforts to reconciling with those we can and targeting those we can’t.” That’s what we did, first in Anbar, then in Baghdad and the entire country. Commanders can cut through detail and the less important and focus their units

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on what matters most, and that’s an essential part of successful command.

Commanders are always “on parade.” They model the behavior they expect from their soldiers and subordinates. This is not so much something they do; it’s more a case of who they are. Thus they profoundly influence tomorrow’s leaders for good or bad—a heavy responsibility. Some commanders are often out and about, seeing and being seen, and keeping their finger on the pulse of the unit—not in interminable briefings but in face-to-face interaction with their soldiers. That’s true leadership. On the other hand, commanders who are yellers and screamers, or micromanagers, tend to produce subordinates who grow up to be the same way. This is how toxic leadership is perpetuated in our ranks down through the years.

My Army days are now in my rearview mirror, and I feel lucky indeed to have played a small part in a wonderful story, a story that now belongs to others. I thank them for all they’ve done, and all they will do, in defense of a country that Lincoln once called the last best hope of earth. It’s worth defending. It’s worth fighting and dying for. ★

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