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# **Fear and Loathing in the Motor Pool**



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**DIVISION OF NEUROPSYCHIATRY**

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**FEAR AND LOATHING IN THE MOTOR POOL:**

**An Historical Context for Framing Leadership  
Challenges In The U.S. Army With Special Consideration  
Given To The Corps of Noncommissioned Officers**

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## PREFACE

This paper is one of a series of occasional, informal accounts, of work in the Division of Neuropsychiatry at the Walter Reed Army Institute of Research. The reports generally address topics in Army preventive medicine for which implementation responsibility lies significantly outside the Medical Department. Although their contents may overlap partly with our publications in the scientific literature, most papers are based on trip reports, briefing, and consultations involving specific Army audiences. Comments to the senior author are welcome.

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The U.S. Army theme for 1985 was "Leadership." Before we declare the year a success and move on to our next challenge, I would like to set the historical context in which all contemporary discussions of leadership must be framed.

My remarks are based on tape recorded career histories of 20 senior representing most of the Army's career fields to include division level CSMs. These were collected in 1983-84. The interviews ranged from 10 to 23 hours each, but transcription takes 10 to 12 hours for each hours of tape. Transcription is still in progress, so the following account is my story of their stories.

I came away from the interviews with profound admiration and respect for the corps of Noncommissioned Officers. The sheer native abilities of these NCOs was very impressive, their understanding of soldiers and the Army profound, and their loyalty to the Army and the country unquestioned. I also came away with grave misgivings that, in our NCO professional development efforts, we are emphasizing the wrong things. I fear we are likely to end up with senior NCOs decidedly less capable than the NCOs I interviewed -- soldiers who had achieved so much with very little in the way of school training. But let me tell the story.

Once upon a time, long 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 South 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 for that once-magnificent Army.

Many dedicated NCOs and Officers tried to carry on, but the task became increasingly difficult. War protests eroded necessary 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 became the norm in 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 and responsibilities. Charlie Company refused to move out when ordered. Discipline broke. The Army and the nation trembled in disgust, anger and frustration at revelation of atrocities symbolized by Mai Lai. Senior officers looked the other way. But 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 couple month's jump 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 have them respect you for it), are things you don't learn in school. These things you have to learn by watching somebody with a knack, and then trying to copy. Well you can imagine the time they had when all hell broke loose in the Army, when discipline was shot, and when nobody could tell anybody to lay the Claymore.

Those were the times when many NCOs and officers were more afraid of their own troops than the enemy. Those were the days of fraggings, and racial protests on the Commanding General's front lawn. Those were the days in Germany where in some units no officer or NCO had dared go above the first floor of the barracks in years. Those were the days of hassling over haircuts, confiscating drugs and being 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. Combat ineffective throughout the world, it was. 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 betrayed their sacred trusts and so much as admitted to being crooks. Oh, it looked like an army on the outside, but inside it was hollow. All the depots has been picked clean, OMA funds diverted, and serious unit training eliminated. What was left of the Army sat in ratty facilities maintaining worn out equipment with funds to do nothing.

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; taking another hitch hardly seemed worth the hassle. 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.

Others quit because there was no work for them when they returned; it 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. For a variety of reasons 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: what billets in garrison ought to look like; how to inspect a mess hall; drill and ceremonies; full field layouts; little pocket books with personal data on each soldier; correcting a soldier out of uniform -- any soldier, any where, any time; 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 that were left -- the ones that stayed to put the Army back together again -- had a hell of a job on their hands with drugs, indiscipline, racial incidents, worn-out equipment, and crummy facilities. 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 the old sergeants had picked up over their years of coming up to the ranks. 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 a Claymore 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 them 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 on the bedspreads for females seemed to go too far!

So the Army up and done something smart. If NCOs could be school-trained for the jungle, for combat, then they could 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 many senior NCOs who remembered how a good Army was put together, the young guys 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 school either didn't or couldn't teach. That was 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 how to use that information. The old sergeants knew the value of greeting a private, "So, Smitty, how does it feel to be 19 today?" And they knew how to arrange for time off or 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 their wives and kids, too. And the schools never mentioned sergeants getting their duds out of jail in the middle of the night, for no other reason than the sergeant felt responsible for them. Good or bad, for better or for worse, they were his responsibility. These things are not learned from the platform; they must be demonstrated, practiced, and then critiqued by somebody who knows what he is doing. 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 rhythm was wrong. Again, these things have 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 he would set'em 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 own authority. They too, could have fun at unit socials, because both work and play were just different aspects of family life. The youngsters grew up in the jungle; they knew how a real enemy drew soldiers together. But 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 agin'em.

Remember the difference between laying the Claymore in the jungle yourself and insuring somebody else somebody else did it right? Same thing happened in garrison. It doesn't come natural to walk up to a stranger and tell him his shoes need polish. It's not easy to look a soldier in the eye and say, "Your work doesn't measure up to my standards; do it again." It was easier, and more natural, to just let it slide or do it yourself rather than risk a confrontation. 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 short cut, 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 70's when the Army was flat on its butt, sergeants had a real enemy, alright: 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, extra duties, expeditious discharges, and both judicial and nonjudicial punishments. They intimidated their officers for not

sufficiently backing them, and soon had additional administrative ways to get rid of the riff-raff. 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 Officers 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; 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 never 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." A sharp image is the mark of a "professional" who tells people what to do; "professionals" don't have to get their hands dirty in this Army anymore. A "professional" is loyal and never laughs at the turkeys at headquarters. (Especially if you hope to be a turkey yourself someday!) A "professional" doesn't laugh much at all: soldiering is serious business. If "professionals" laugh at all, it is at the expense of the troops, not the officers or the crazy Army bureaucracy.

It's not the fault of the NCO's, really. It's not the fault of the Officer Corps. It's not the system's fault, either. It's nobody's fault. Things just turned out that way. Not all NCOs turned "professional." The Sergeant Morales Club represents NCOs who got "grewed up" in the old ways. A wise old Sergeant Major of the Army once commented, "You can train an officer, but you gotta grow a sergeant." 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 of their times and circumstances. But they may not be good enough for war.

They grew up fearing their troops; in war they must trust them. They grew up despising their soldiers, but in war they must love them. They grew up whipping the unit into shape, but in war they must lead it. They grew up commanding respect, but in war must command devotion. They grew up keeping their distance and maintaining their proper place, but 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 or embarrassment, because we're all family.

In the long march back from the days of the mutinous mob, the NCOs got confused about intimacy and authority, maybe for good reasons at the time. They saw intimacy and authority as opposites and incompatible. They mixed up categories like "drinking buddies" and "friends" and "little brothers and sisters in arms." They equated training with classes and going to the field, and 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 ain't goin'." 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 not.

I wish this story had a happy ending, but it has no ending at all. The story's still being written. Is it true, the part I've told? I can't be sure. I've just recollected the recollections of about 500 years of individual NCO experience. The 20 folk I interviewed told me the same stories, even though they never met. If you doubt me, all the stories will be donated to the Museum of the Noncommissioned Officer at Ft. Bliss, Texas, where you

can read'em yourself, and make up your own mind whether I told the story wrong.

I do know the Army that so long ago went to war in the jungle is now reviewing its Noncommissioned Officer Education System. It's a damned fine system that has accomplished a lot. My grave misgiving is that it has a flaw. That is the failure to teach leadership as the old timers understood it, in terms of the 4C's: competence, caring, compassion and commitment. The Army once knew how to teach that kind of leadership, and how to grow sergeants who could practice it. Maybe the Army could teach that kind of leadership again, while there's still time, before it's too late.

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