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COMBAT LESSONS

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Leadership



There is no typical military leader. Patterns of traits and behaviors exhibited by successful leaders vary infinitely. However, among men of proven leadership ability, certain characteristics seem to be consistently observable; these characteristics, some of which are reviewed in the paragraphs to follow, are worthy of study and cultivation by every soldier who leads or may be called upon to lead men in combat.

What the GI Wants in His Leaders

The men and officers of an infantry battalion on combat duty with the *Twelfth Army Group* in FRANCE were asked this question: "What qualities, in your opinion, make a man a good leader?" Here are the most frequently mentioned leadership qualities as worded in the men's replies:

"A leader must have a thorough knowledge of his job and must see that his men know that he knows it.

"He must rotate duties and missions without partiality, exercising judgment and fairness in all decisions

and never allowing personal feelings to affect the performance of his duties.

“He must think clearly and be able to make quick, sound decisions. He must give orders with an air of confidence even when the going gets rough.

“He should show a cheerful front under even the most trying circumstances and never appear excited.

“He must make the men feel that he is interested in them and doing his best to help them. The men should know that he will stick up for them if need arises.

“The leader should have something called ‘personality.’ If the men do not feel free to come to him, he is not their leader. He should know each man personally and understand the job of each man under him.

“He must earn the confidence and respect of his men by sharing their common lot; they should be able to think of him as one of them.



“Stick up for your men.”

“He must comply with his own rules and regulations and should never ask his men to undertake a mission that he would be unable or unwilling to attempt himself.

“He must be in the fight with his men, but even when setting an example of courage should not expose himself foolishly nor allow or expect his men to do so.

“The good leader encourages; he does not nag.

“The leader should keep his men oriented as to their mission and situation.”

Leadership Rises to Emergencies

Says a *Marine Corps officer* after action in the GILBERT Islands: “Leaders of all ranks must be prepared to meet emergencies and sudden changes in situations and to furnish the spark of inspiration when their units have become discouraged. The true leader is the one who takes the men and materials at hand and gets the job done in spite of complications.”

The value of a leader of this emergency-tackling variety is well proved in this story of *Staff Sergeant H. L. Schmidt, Combat Infantryman*, during an action in FRANCE: “When his platoon leader and platoon sergeant had become casualties and the platoon had been disorganized by heavy enemy fire, Sergeant Schmidt took command and reorganized the platoon. Then he advanced alone for 100 yards and with hand grenades knocked out two enemy machine-gun nests. This feat reinspired the members of the platoon, and under Schmidt’s leadership they pushed forward and captured a strongly defended enemy position. The leadership and initiative of this one soldier not only

saved his platoon but also opened the way for the entire battalion to advance to its objective."

C **Leadership Exploits Surprise**

From the *Battalion Commander, 2nd Battalion, 47th Infantry, FRANCE*, comes a striking example of the value of good planning—in this case based upon the element of surprise: "While going through the Siegfried Line, a platoon was given the mission of



"Surprise saves lives."

knocking out a bunker situated in a clearing on a steep and heavily wooded hill. The platoon worked its way up the hill slowly and stealthily, moving through the woods in line of squad columns on a 50-yd. front. Scouts were out about 20 yards ahead. To facilitate control, the platoon leader and platoon sergeant acted as center scouts.

"The platoon halted at the edge of the clearing only about 75 yards from the bunker. Though they saw three enemy walking along nearby, the platoon leader

and his men held their fire until they were discovered. At that moment, they shot the three Germans and rushed the bunker. Two Germans outside the pillbox surrendered immediately and a couple of grenades thrown into the entrance of the bunker brought about the prompt surrender of the remaining garrison which numbered 22 men. This surprise attack gained the bunker without a single shot from its defenders."

d Leadership Means Quick Planning

An intelligence report mentions this instance of quick planning resulting in "mission accomplished": "*Staff Sergeant Robert G. Rhodes, Company B, 315th Infantry, 79th Division*, was in charge of the platoon that had just captured a certain hill position on the Seine River, north of Paris. The inevitable counter-attack was expected at any minute and the sergeant lost no time in preparing for it. He placed one squad close to the crest of the elevation; this group was to serve as a base of fire. The other two squads he distributed, one on the right front and one on the left front, both well forward. The two flank squads were given German machine pistols and German machine guns and were given orders not to fire until the enemy had advanced *beyond* their position.

"As expected, a German battalion attacked in strength, advancing steadily toward the center squad, which kept firing away as per plan. The enemy had almost reached the center squad's position when the two flank squads opened up with the German weapons. The Germans were instantly confused, convinced that they were being shot by their own troops. As a result, this one platoon defeated and pushed back a

whole enemy battalion—a feat that would have been impossible except for the ready resourcefulness and ingenious planning of the platoon leader.”

Leadership Is Aggressive

The value of aggressive action even against superior enemy forces is again illustrated by this story of a small group of men from the *502nd Parachute Infantry Regiment, FRANCE*, as recounted by *Private First Class William Rubendael*: “At daylight on Christmas morning, one group of 20 men encountered a German company of about 150 men supported by 4 Mark IV tanks. The Americans had 4 light machine guns, 2 bazookas, and their rifles and carbines.

“The Germans were already digging in when discovered. Their tanks soon opened fire on the farmhouse around which the Americans had taken positions and forced our men back about 200 yards to the edge of a patch of woods. At that point the hard-pressed platoon leader decided that his best defense was bold attack. He borrowed several riflemen from a nearby company and then had his machine guns keep the enemy infantry down and their tanks but-toned up while the two bazooka teams and the rifle-men moved around to the German company’s flank. This small but aggressive maneuvering force inflicted heavy casualties upon the enemy infantry, knocked out three tanks, and forced the other tank to withdraw to a point where it was destroyed by an adjacent American unit.

“Not content with this accomplishment, the para-troopers moved on to attack a nearby enemy-held farmhouse. The German occupants surrendered,

turning over their weapons to some American prisoners they had been holding in the same building.”

Leadership Means Assuming Responsibility

The ability of enlisted men to step forward and take charge in the absence of appointed leaders has in many reported instances saved the lives of comrades, made possible the accomplishment of difficult missions, and prevented the serious disruption of important plans. The following account by the *Chief of Staff, 3d Infantry Division, FRANCE*, describes how one emergency was met through the efforts of an enlisted leader who assumed responsibility for getting the mission accomplished: “One evening, a platoon leader from one company of the 7th Infantry was wounded while returning to his command post with orders for a scheduled night attack. His platoon sergeant, knowing that an attack had been planned and realizing from the platoon leader’s absence that something had gone wrong, proceeded to the company command post, obtained the plan of attack, and took charge of the situation. He led the platoon through a booby-trapped minefield to the assigned objective, directed dispersion of the men in spite of heavy enemy artillery harassment, reconnoitered to within 50 yards of the enemy positions, and organized the area of defense. His platoon had already begun to dig in when first detected by the enemy. The sergeant then organized and directed offensive fire so effectively that the enemy withdrew from buildings in the area. This timely execution of pre-attack plans, in spite of the platoon leader’s absence, enabled the attack on the town to proceed according to plan.”

Leaders Must Maintain Control

The value of a leader is measured by his ability to keep his men working as a team. While it must be recognized that some situations can be met only by heroic action on the part of individual leaders, the most important function of a leader is to direct and coordinate the efforts of a group. The following remarks by the *Commanding Officer, 6th Armored Infantry Battalion, ITALY*, serve as an excellent commentary on this problem.

“The average platoon leader and NCO are brought up with the idea that leadership means ‘leadership from the front.’ The fact that casualties of platoon leaders and sergeants are disproportionately high proves that this fallacy is too generally accepted. Actually, the platoon leader’s position is a roving one; it is impossible to stipulate any definite position from which he shall operate. At times, he will be as far forward as the scouts, but his normal position should be wherever he can best control his platoon. Casualties among veteran leaders would be fewer if we properly instructed each platoon leader as to what his job is and what is expected from him.

Make Intelligent Use of Junior Leaders

“The shortage of junior officers makes it necessary to exercise judgment in employment of commissioned officers. Leadership of routine missions should be assigned to sergeants whenever possible. Platoon officers should be used only for missions which actually call for commissioned leadership. This policy insures a reserve of capable leaders for the more urgent assignments and serves to develop NCO leaders.”

Leadership Involves Personal Contact

Personal contact between a leader and his men is still an important factor, as is reiterated by a *Battalion Commander, 36th Armored Regiment, FRANCE*: "The presence of high-ranking officers—battalion, regimental, and division commanders—well forward, gives men confidence."



"Leadership involves personal contact."

Briefing—A "Must" in Practical Leadership

A *Battalion Commander, 6th Armored Division, FRANCE*, emphasizes briefing: "Unless each man knows not only his own but also his unit's mission, there can be no intelligent continuity of effort when casualties occur. The individual learns his job during training; confidence in command is developed during maneuvers and combat; but knowledge of the mission can be gained only through careful briefing on the ground. Results obtained by careful briefing were shown during a recent operation in which 800 Germans were captured and 200 killed at a cost to us of 16 casualties."

The *Regimental Surgeon, 115th Infantry, FRANCE*, makes this statement: "Battalion and regimental surgeons will manage evacuation problems more intelligently and alertly if they are kept acquainted with the situation. The indulgent doling out of necessary information in response to repeated requests by the surgeon discourages him and causes him to lose incentive and initiative."

COMMENT: In all operations, large or small, not only the medics but all attached units should be kept fully informed as to the mission and situation so that their supporting roles can be efficiently accomplished.

Don't Overdo Example Leadership

The *Divisional and Regimental Staffs* of the *2d, 28th, and 83d Infantry Divisions* in FRANCE and GERMANY agree that: "The constant emphasis on 'example' leadership in our training and teaching has resulted in our losing many valuable leaders—from generals to corporals. Experienced leaders are difficult to replace; the loss is seriously affecting the efficiency of some of our units. Emergencies sometimes arise which require leaders to expose themselves and by personal example get an attack moving or calm down men who are about to break. Some leaders, however, carry their job to the point that their presence is almost standard operating procedure; as a result, their subordinates do not move unless the leader is there. Each officer and NCO and enlisted man should be trained to do his job and then be given the chance and responsibility of doing it."