



To: Company Commanders

From: Company Commanders

The Leadership Legacy of John Whyte

John Whyte commanded three companies, including a rifle company in Iraq. John was killed in an accident after returning from combat, when a car struck him while he was standing on the side of a Kansas City highway.

There is a proverb that reads, "As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another." Those who knew John might change it to read, "As iron sharpens iron, so John Whyte sharpens those around him." He was on a self-imposed mission to be the most effective leader that he could be, and even better, he was on a self-imposed mission to help other people do the same. He was driven to make a difference for his family, Soldiers, and the larger profession like no other person we have encountered. One of the many ways that he made a difference was by participating in the Platoon Leader and Company-Command professional forums. His contribution in these forums was, quite simply, remarkable. In tribute to John, we have captured a few of his words in this article.

Leadership Responsibility

The toughest leadership challenge I had was bearing the personal responsibility for my Soldiers throughout operations. I really took it to heart. I guess I probably wouldn't do it differently, but it was a personal challenge in that it was harder than I had expected. My Soldiers were actually able (and very willing) to do a lot more than I was ready to ask them to do at first. Later, when Soldiers got hurt, I second-guessed myself a lot and that slowed me down. It snuck up on me, but I realized later that it really took its toll over several months. My first sergeant and I became very close and we got through it together. I learned from him to give the platoons



John Whyte (left) commanded A/1-30th Infantry (Mechanized), 3rd Brigade, 3rd Infantry Division (Mechanized), during Operation Iraqi Freedom I. To his left is 1SG Todd Hibbs.

some guidance and let them execute. He taught me the difference between company leader and company commander.

Training Latitude/Fostering Initiative

I think we all have to constantly work to give subordinates the opportunity to try something in training, possibly fail and learn from it. I've always recognized and fought my tendency to be too directive or prescriptive. It often seems that training opportunities are too precious to waste an iteration of an event by letting a subordinate leader do something you're pretty sure won't work. If you are that sure that it won't work, then you're better off letting them try it—you'll never truly convince them any other way, and they'll learn from it. Who knows, you could be wrong and it might work!



When you give them some latitude in training, it will pay off as initiative in combat.

Team Building

The most important things we did before combat were training and building a strong team of leaders in the company. We spent a month at Ft. Stewart in the fall of 2002 training and operating as a company, day-in and day-out. Then we trained more in Kuwait. By the time we crossed the berm, we were a team of teams. I was privileged to have a top-notch 1SG who kept me straight and a great bunch of lieutenants and platoon sergeants who did the heavy lifting. I think they knew my priorities and how I expected them to do business. The result was that the platoon leaders and platoon sergeants were confident and able to execute as subordinate teams.

Decentralized Execution/Trusting Subordinates

The thing I'll remember in 50 years is our day on Baghdad International Airport, because I am so proud of how my Soldiers and subordinate leaders executed their missions. At one point, I had five separate elements, with four of them in contact, and I thought I was losing control. I thought that I had over-extended my company. I thought someone was going to get hurt because I was screwing up. In slow motion, I started to realize that every single element was doing exactly what I would have told them to do if I was standing there next to them. At the end of the day, we had one Bradley Commander who was evacuated out of theater (since recovered), and a couple of other guys hurt, but we accomplished the mission because Soldiers and leaders had stepped up—and, to a man—done the right thing.

On Soldiers

I love their enthusiasm. I miss walking into the company in the morning. These days, they know what they've signed

“There is no other leader in the Army whom I’ve worked with that had the potential that John had ... he is, in every sense of the word, my ‘Battle Buddy,’ and he’ll never be forgotten.” —CSM Hibbs

up for, and they demand combat capable leaders. They are the world’s toughest critics, and they’ve earned that right. They’ll let you know when they’re buying what you’re selling, and they’ll call you on it if you’re full of it. When you’ve taken them through something tough and they smile at you afterwards, you know you’ve passed the test.

Combatives

Combatives training makes Soldiers more disciplined, and certainly more mentally and physically tough. In fact, I don’t know of anything that does a better job of making an individual Soldier more mentally and physically tough. Personally, I think the best place to make the difference is at the company level, and I’d encourage all company commanders to try to get at least one Soldier trained up to “Level II” and a few Soldiers to “Level I.” That will get the ball rolling. It’s worth it.

Discipline

It’s discouraging, but I’m here to tell you that bad things happen, even in good units. The First Sergeant and I had to “reel in” a platoon camped out on the side of the road in a palm grove in Iraq in May 2003. I woke up one morning and saw some pretty unbelievable stuff in my company. All of a sudden it hit me—what the heck do we look like? If the boys were looking for the limit, they had found it. The 1SG got a little more involved in life than the PSGs would have preferred. ... we were straight within an hour, never again to return to “China Beach” mode.

Lessons from Ranger School

Can someone honestly tell me that they learned true leadership skills while in Ranger school? Yes. Yes! Good.

God, yes! Of course!

Here are the first 20 lessons that come to mind:

1. I learned that you run off a drop zone—and make the correction when Soldiers are straggling.
2. I learned to pull out my map even when I’m in the back of the truck on a long ride.
3. I learned the value of tie-downs and sensitive items checks.
4. I learned what hygiene is important and what’s not, and to make sure Soldiers are staying healthy.
5. I learned how to live out of a rucksack and that Soldiers carry weight they don’t need.
6. I learned that snivel gear is for when you stop moving and Soldiers sneaking snivel gear will become heat casualties in the winter.

7. I learned to make subordinate leaders brief you back.

8. I learned that you brief back what you've been told to do, even if your leader doesn't ask you to.

9. I learned that you get out of the bag in the middle of the night to check on your Soldiers.

10. I learned that staying positive and staying motivated regardless of the circumstances is a combat multiplier and that there's no such thing as negative leadership.

11. I learned how to supervise.

12. I learned that standards are standards even if you're cold, tired, hungry or all of the above.

13. I learned how to involve subordinates in a plan without letting it be a democracy.

14. I learned how to lead and operate under pressure.

15. I learned that even if your lead squad leader is a great navigator, you still keep track of where you are.

16. I learned that you don't "finger drill" pre-combat inspections.

17. I learned to ask privates questions to make sure the plan got down to the lowest level.

18. I learned that I can lead hurt, and how to recognize when a soldier is hurt or just "wimping out."

19. I learned that you can count on a Ranger.

20. Most of all, I learned that memorizing the Ranger Creed is easy; living it is harder.

Expectations of a Lieutenant

The minimum standard is not the officer standard. If I were training my next set of 2LTs, here's what I would want them to know to make them successful platoon leaders or junior staff officers, focusing on 3 areas:

1. Officership: To me, this means 100% round-the-clock professionalism and commitment to competence. Officership includes doing a lot of the "old-fashioned" things like:

- Standing at attention when the CO is talking to you, because that's what the NCOs are teaching the Soldiers to do when the lieutenant is talking to them.

- Reading Field Manuals or professional reading (not magazines) when you're on SDO, because it's a profession (not a job) and Soldiers are watching.

- Always being seen by your Soldiers in a proper uniform or presentable clothes (or wearing your K-pot and vest) even when you're off duty (or "just going to the next track").

- Checking on your Soldiers hanging out in the barracks on the weekend (or securing a bridge in Baghdad in the middle of the night).

- Pulling a shift of radio watch in the middle of the night.



John Whyte (right) stands with 1SG Hibbs in Kuwait before they cross the border into Iraq.

"He wasn't a know-it-all, but he wanted to learn it all."

—Maj. Rob Griggs,

who served with John as a lieutenant and a captain

- Showing up for work 30 minutes before PT (and not sleeping during stand-to in the TAA in Kuwait).

- Personally supervising command maintenance or a lay out (and climbing into the turret of every BFV—walking the PDF).

2. Combat skills of the Soldier: Warrior tasks and drills. These are non-negotiable. If I walk up to a PL with no warning and give him an APFT, he should pass. No question, no worries, no "I need to hydrate and eat pasta the night before." With a week's warning so that he doesn't do the mother of all workouts the day before, he should "max" the APFT, or at least earn the APFB.

3. Combat skills of the officer/leader: Read, write and give an OPORD. Task and purpose, the "nested" concept, and how they're either the main effort or supporting the main effort. Knowledge of U.S. and threat weapons and their capabilities—what's the range of my 81mm mortars and where are they?

Moral Courage

Respectful disagreement is always your duty. When it's moral and ethical, but you just don't like it, you have to exe-

“At John’s funeral, the Soldiers of 3rd ID paid him the greatest tribute when they spontaneously broke into the 3rd ID Marne Song. It was an incredible moment—one I’ll never forget.”

*—Jay Miseli,
who commanded with John during
Operation Iraqi Freedom*

cute. These days, I try to give someone the benefit of the doubt when I hear something I don’t like. I try to first figure out how what he’s telling me to do is for the right reasons. More often than not, they’re just trying to do what’s right, too. Again, do the right thing and you’ll be fine in the long run.

Continuous Training

One problem we have as trainers is teaching subordinates something once and then calling them “trained.” Adult humans don’t learn like that. If you teach call for fire, you can’t expect that they can call a polar mission several months later unless you continue to train it. You have to revisit everything. The problem is not usually, “I was never taught that.” The problem is usually, “I think I did that once 3 years ago.”

Loyalty

Sometimes when we’re leaders, we want to side with our Soldiers no matter what—we think that’s loyalty. Sometimes we have a hard time balancing loyalty to Soldiers, loyalty to the unit and loyalty to the Army. Remember this: loyalty to your Soldiers is important, but *blind* loyalty is dangerous. I had trouble with that myself as a lieutenant, and

as a CO I watched my lieutenants learn to pick their battles. Here’s my story:

My first CO was a great guy. Everyone loved him. We thought the company was the best around because everyone would do anything for him. Naturally, none of us lieutenants ever disagreed with him—it was always good news.

My next CO was as hard as nails. He chewed our collective lieutenant butts daily. We hated the guy; I mean we couldn’t stand him. Every last one of us was “outta here” as soon as we could do the paperwork. Here’s what I figured out later: we needed it; we were screwed up; and we *deserved* most of the butt chewings.

Looking back, in most cases I could recall, the second CO had been doing the right thing, I just couldn’t see it from his perspective. He was loyal to his Soldiers, too. He loved them enough to train hard, train to standard, and fight for the company without them even knowing he was doing it. Years later, I think I’ve grown up a lot. The second CO is the one I want to emulate and the one I call or write when I need advice on a tough situation.

To those who knew John, he has become a symbol for what it means to be a professional Army officer. One part of being a professional is taking time to share what you are learning—to engage in professional conversation with peers and those who are preparing to follow. We hope John’s example spurs others on to follow his lead. John Whyte, we salute you! Maj. John Patrick Whyte is survived by his wife, Jennifer, his son, Jack, his daughter, Abigail and his parents, John Patrick Whyte, Jr., and Marie Whyte.

NOTE: The “Hall of Honor” section of the Company-Command professional forum is dedicated to the memory of fallen company commanders. Please visit and pay respect to the many leaders who are honored there.



CC is Company Commanders.

The CC forum is a voluntary, grass-roots forum that is by-and-for company commanders. The forum is positive and practical—focused like a laser beam on the practice of company command and those things that are important to company commanders. Send article ideas to nate.self@us.army.mil.

Company Commanders, connect at <http://CompanyCommand.army.mil>