

Combat Lessons Stick for Life



By R.W. Trewyn

Every major achievement in my life over the past half-century-plus can be attributed to the leadership lessons learned during my service in the U.S. Army. The Noncommissioned Officer Candidate Course during the Vietnam War was dubbed the “Shake ‘N’ Bake” school. It provided truly outstanding leadership training and allowed me to become a staff sergeant less than 10 months after being drafted at age 24.

The skills taught to me and my fellow “Shake ‘N’ Bakes” by awesome, demanding Army NCOs were validated in Vietnam a few months later, and they have served me well since then. Up to that point in my life, I had led no one and had no meaningful aspirations to do so.

Having been raised on a small dairy farm in Wisconsin, my

primary goal was to keep cow manure out of my future. No disrespect to America’s farmers; it just wasn’t my calling.

Reflecting on my career after retiring in 2022, I can sum it up easily and proudly. With a bachelor’s degree never in my plans after high school, earning a PhD and competing successfully in higher education for over a half century were due, unequivocally, to my 19 months in the Army and serving in combat in Vietnam. The last 28 years of my academic life were spent in university administration, where Army leadership lessons and combat insights were particularly relevant after 20 years focusing on cancer research.

Best Motto Ever

Three Army leadership lessons proved particularly relevant, with a fourth being a bit more nebulous. First, is the Army

infantry motto—“Follow Me!”—hammered home at Fort Benning, Georgia, now known as Fort Moore. In my 80 years, that’s the best leadership motto I have ever heard and, most importantly, it works everywhere. Nonetheless, “Follow Me” comes at a cost in combat. It’s why the Shake ‘N’ Bake program was needed to address the shortages of squad leader and platoon sergeant NCOs in Vietnam and why we were told four of five of us would be killed or wounded in action. Leader casualties accrue more readily up front when “Follow me” is the standard.

Next on my leadership list would be, “Think you can.” Although that was not an explicit lesson taught stateside that I recall, making it through NCO school required it. Then, the

Staff Sgt. R.W. Trewyn monkeys around with a mortar platoon mascot after a patrol near Binh Chanh, Vietnam, in April 1969.

importance of positive thinking became intuitively obvious in Vietnam.

The 2nd Platoon of Company D, 2nd Battalion, 3rd Infantry Regiment (The Old Guard), 199th Light Infantry Brigade, had a “think you can” attitude going into every mission and was usually successful as a result. We became known as the “No Sweat Platoon” for a reason. Conversely, Delta’s 3rd Platoon oozed “think you can’t,” and its casualty numbers reflected it. Those were always high, particularly among their leadership positions—lieutenants and sergeants.

No Sweat

While most of my time in Vietnam was spent with the “No Sweat” troops, I was assigned as 3rd Platoon leader on a couple of occasions when they had no lieutenant or NCOs remaining. Regrettably, my efforts to change “think you can’t” to “think you can” failed during the first couple weeks or so, and my second time around only lasted a day. A booby trap that was tripped behind me resulted in five of us being loaded onto an airborne medical ride out, and it ended my combat tour of duty. Four months later, shrapnel lodged near my heart got me a discharge 150 days early.

Long after my service in Vietnam, I ran across a quotation by Henry Ford: “Whether you think you can or think you can’t, you are right.” He was spot-on with that one.

Selfless Service

The next Army lesson might be the most consequential of all. It is the awe-inspiring, selfless service observed in combat, something I have described since experiencing it firsthand as “We, not me.”

It’s the phenomenon of soldiers in battle placing a greater value on their brothers’ lives than on their own. When a firefight is raging and the killed and wounded numbers are growing, being surrounded by “We, not me” troops has life-changing impacts. It illuminates self-sacrificing virtue within that you’ll never forget.

Most movie depictions of war suggest heroism is limited in scope. Living through battles demonstrated to me that valor is nearly universal. Almost every soldier places their teammate’s life ahead of their own. They’ll risk their own life to protect their brother. And with replacements rolling through, some of those brothers they knew only a few days. However, that did not matter. The colorblind combat brotherhood developed almost instantly.

Extrapolate “We, not me” to leadership anywhere. It’s about the team, not the leader. Any leader who focuses on team success and accomplishing the team’s mission over personal career advancement will be successful. Just like the first two leadership lessons, “We, not me” is universal.

Seeing Clearly

Finally, the more nebulous leadership skill entails “battlefield vision.” It is real. Some people have it, some people do not. I am at a loss to explain how it’s acquired. Nonetheless, being able to survey the battlefield and make sense of it during pandemonium is a valuable attribute.

Our “usual” 2nd Platoon lieutenant in Vietnam had it. And I like to think I did as well, but that is not for me to judge. Regardless, being able to survey the academic battlefield may have helped me in various roles

over the years. Those included directing an interdisciplinary graduate program at Ohio State University and managing a shared service in the Comprehensive Cancer Center there. Then, I served as dean of the graduate school and vice provost/vice president for research at Kansas State University as well as president of the affiliated research foundation there.

In those positions and a few others, combat leadership lessons were always front and center in my approach. Hopefully, my efforts were viewed positively by those within my areas of responsibility and those affected by them.

These approaches work everywhere, not just in combat: “Follow me!” “Think you can.” “We, not me.”

Receiving my draft notice two days before Christmas in 1967 was not a good day for me ... at the time. Little did I realize how positively it would affect my life from that day forward.

Combat leadership lessons have stuck with me for life, and I feel lucky to have learned them. I am certain I did not always apply these lessons maximally, but I tried my best.

Combat teaches you—up close and personal—the high costs of war, and too few in America today value those costs.

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