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SSG Still Outranks My PhD Over a Half-Century Later⁽¹⁾

By R.W. Trewyn*

Having spent over 55-years inside academe — earning Bachelor of Science (BS) and Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) degrees, then serving as a post-doctoral cancer researcher, faculty member and research administrator, not retiring until almost 79 years of age — how the one-year title of Staff Sergeant (SSG) decades ago could mean more to me than my PhD might seem bizarre. Nonetheless, it's true.

Why?

The 19-months in the U.S. Army, as a 24-year-old draftee, transformed my life. Essentially every significant civilian success thereafter can be attributed to that brief stint serving America, and two main factors were responsible.

First was the 12-week Non-Commissioned Officer (NCO) Candidate Course — a.k.a., Shake 'N' Bake school — attended following basic and advanced infantry training. The Vietnam War created a huge shortage of infantry squad leaders and platoon sergeants, so Shake 'N' Bakes were needed to fill the void back then.



The butt-busting instruction by Army Rangers, mostly, was first-rate with the infantry leadership motto, Follow Me, being thoroughly engrained, then applied in combat and long afterwards during my academic career. Thanks to their efforts, I earned my SSG stripes — three strips and a rocker — a little over eight months after being sworn in. And somehow, out of nearly 170 graduates, I managed to be one of eight who earned the rocker to go with the three stripes. In peacetime, attaining that rank would require years of service.

Second, and most importantly, was leading troops in combat in Vietnam. I was only in Vietnam three and a half months — January 7 to April 19, 1969 — but I experienced enough combat to employ all of the NCO training and then some. Starting off Groundhog Day as a squad leader, then jumped to platoon leader by the end of the day, doing the job of a Lieutenant. The reason: Delta Company casualties, killed and wounded, were tragically high in a bloody, day-long battle.

The remainder of my time in Vietnam was split about equally between platoon sergeant and platoon leader, the latter involving two different platoons.

As should be expected, Follow Me is accompanied by lots of casualties in leadership positions in the infantry. Thus, the need to assign ranking NCOs remaining in the company wherever they are needed, including into officer slots when necessary. That's how I got shuffled around every couple weeks or so.

In addition to Follow Me, three other leadership parameters were driven home under fire, having been introduced during the NCO training. They were: think you can; WE *not* ME (selfless service); and battlefield vision. Their roles have been described elsewhere.

My combat duty ended April 18th when a visiting Major tripped a booby trap behind me. Three pieces of shrapnel hit me and the one embedded 2-inches from my heart got me shipped to Okinawa the next day and out of the Army after serving 19 months. Nonetheless, the leadership principles validated in combat proved to be invaluable from then on.

Without them, there's no way I would have been president of the university research foundation (16 years), vice provost for research and dean of the graduate school (9 years), and vice president for research (7 years). Warfare within the hallowed halls tends to be bloodless, but Follow Me, think you can, WE *not* ME and battlefield vision are all applicable.

But how can the rank of SSG before my name mean more to me today than the PhD after my name?

Well, the consequences of one's actions in Vietnam, regardless of rank, could result in life or death of teammates. My PhD was never so onerous. Had I held the SSG rank in peacetime, any lasting impacts almost certainly would have been diminished.

Also, I don't think I have ever done anything better in my life than I did my jobs in Vietnam. That's just my assessment, but it's what I believe. I've mentioned to friends previously that if one is supposed to do in life what it is they're best at, staying in the Army would have made the most sense for me. Somehow, though, knowing I should have died on multiple occasions in 1969, civilian life appeared more promising.

And, finally, it's unlikely that anything could match the pride instilled while serving in a combat unit where selfless service — WE *not* ME — is the norm. In fact, I feel sorry for people who haven't experienced that during their lives. Being surrounded by individuals willing to die for their brothers around them is something to treasure for a lifetime. That level of brotherly love is awe-inspiring and we could use more WE *not* ME in America today.

Yes, SSG still outranks my PhD ... by a lot!

****R.W. Trewyn is the author of Vietnam's War of Hate: Proud Military Veterans Vilified at Home.***

American Thinker Articles: <https://www.americanthinker.com/author/rwtrewyn/>

References:

⁽¹⁾ <https://www.americanthinker.com/blog/2026/08/ssg-still-outranks-my-phd-over-a-half-century-later/>