

# First With The Most

## Brewer's Axioms

Classic westerns end with the hero capturing the bad guys, kissing the girl, then riding off into the sunset. When I mount up and ride away in July, I will do so with mixed feelings. The Army has been good to me and to my family, and I am grateful for the opportunity to have served my country; however, I am equally excited about the possibilities for the future and I look forward to becoming a regular citizen once again. Yet retiring without offering some hard-learned lessons to my fellow soldiers seems to me the moral equivalent of keeping government equipment without at least attempting to settle-up with the supply system. Brewer's Axioms that follow are neither fully original observations nor absolute truths, and, in many cases, I don't recall specifically who taught which lesson, and even if I did, the chances are good that I wouldn't tell you. Just keep an open mind and absorb what is useful.

"You can have it as good as I've got it, but you can't have it any better." A platoon sergeant said that to me when I was a private, and, at the time, I didn't fully understand him. I now realize the statement was not a declaration of fact as much as a plea for equality of service within the service. People want to be treated with equal respect in the personnel, medical, housing, and other service-oriented areas of the Army. Sure, rank has its



privileges. But basic human dignity should not be a function of the design one bears upon his collar. Our business forces us to recognize another person's rank and render the proper courtesies. But beware when you begin to look first at a person's right collar before determining how you will treat that person.

"You get more flies with honey than you do with vinegar." In-your-face, scream-at-the-top-of-your-lungs, intimidational leadership has its

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By Order of the Secretary of the Army:

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place — a very small place — in the big scheme of things. I have observed, however, that many officers and noncommissioned officers don't understand when or how to use that approach. Treating people with respect, recognizing their talents, correcting them for their mistakes, and setting the example in your own behavior may not take you farther in the rank structure, but it will surely guarantee you a better night's sleep, and, quite often, greater mission success. Pushing people around is a substitute for leadership. You can always escalate to power if finesse fails, but if you start-off with power and you fail, you've got nowhere to go. Cultivate a variety of leadership styles, because if the only tool in your toolbox is a hammer, the whole world looks like a nail.

"The truth only hurts if it should." Be courteous, but direct, with seniors, subordinates, and peers. Don't tell your boss what he wants to hear; tell him what he *needs* to hear. "Yes, sir, I'll make it happen," sounds gung-ho, hard-charging, and mission-oriented. Some leaders will mistake it for dedication. Like "Hoooahh," it is often a substitute for thinking, or worse, for telling the boss the real consequences of his directive.

"Say 'yes' when you can, and 'no' when you have to, rather than the opposite approach." Key concept here. I've had S3s, S4s, company commanders, platoon sergeants, and civilians spend longer telling me why they can't accomplish something than it would have taken to execute the task. Often, I suspect, they say 'no' simply because it gives them a sense of power. Kingdom-building. Entrenchment. Protecting one's powerbase. That's like crying wolf. No one pays attention to you when the answer really should be 'no.' Use your "no's" sparingly, and you'll get more respect when you need them.

"Don't bleed green." If you allow the Army to become your life, you're walking the edge of a precipitous cliff, and no PLF ever designed will help you if you slip off the edge. The service is a sacrificial institution. We all give up something to be a part of it, e.g., constitutional liberties, geographical stability, time with our families, etc. A certain amount of that we must accept with the turf. But pay attention to what you're giving up, and never let the Army or anyone else take it all. If you want to be Sergeant Major of the Army, or a

general officer, go for it. Build your dream-house. Just be sure you count the construction cost, and don't allow your family, your friends or your dignity to become casualties along the way. We've all seen the guy in the Officers Club, NCO Club, or the gymnasium who says, just loud enough for everyone around him to hear, how's he's going to be forced to take leave or lose it. He's too busy, too valuable (he thinks) to his unit, to be away from it. That's a power trip and a fantasy, and it demonstrates poor leadership. Lee Laacoca said in his book that if he had an executive who couldn't plan his time well enough to allow for a week or two of family vacation each year, he didn't want that individual handling multi-million-dollar accounts.

"Diversify yourself." Never allow your self-image, your sense of worth as an individual to become wholly dependent upon being a soldier, for once that prop is knocked from beneath you, you will collapse unless you have cultivated other supports. Prepare yourself for what you will do when you leave the Army while you are *in* the Army. Get a skill. Make the time to attend school. Sure, be dedicated to your unit and your mission. Just don't become so intoxicated on the martial opiate that you forget how to do anything else.

"No sniveling." This was the motto of one of my former commanders — a man with whom I had a bet-your-bars, verbal, knock-down-drag-out altercation about how I spent my time as his S3 — and once we understood each other, I came to respect him as one of my finest leaders. Stand up for yourself. You'll win some, lose some, and some will be called on account of rain. But you'll be able to look yourself in the mirror the next day and be comfortable with what you see. Win or lose, don't snivel. We have enough victims looking for space-A in our society. Don't add to the manifest.

So roll the credits and start the music because I'm riding off now to teach English and continue writing my mystery novels. And while a tear will surely come as I salute the final time, there will be an unmistakable cavalryman's jaunt in my step as I accept a new mission in the civilian world. May God be with you.

— J. D. Brewer