

# Three Things I Learned in the Army

by Colonel (Retired) Paul Baerman

I've been retired from the Army now almost three years, and while working in civilian life, I've had a chance to reflect on the 26-plus years of service and its acquired knowledge and experience. So for the younger readers of *ARMOR*, I thought I'd put some ideas down for consideration.

Since most things in life come in cycles of three, it only stands to reason that there are three things of utmost value that I learned in the Army. Of course, there are many important lessons, but these three things seem to me to be central to the core of being a good soldier and living a worthwhile existence.

**Consider The Source.** Army life is a series of judgment decisions, none more important than those made on the battlefield. Part of the decision-making process is assessing the validity of the information received and where it came from. How many times have you received a spot report, only to question the information it contains? Who sent the report, and was the reporter in the right place to observe? How much training and experience did that person have? Could he tell the difference between models of enemy equipment? Could he read a map?

These sorts of questions evolve into more specific, personal rules of thumb. Let me give two examples. First, in a crisis, never believe the first reports because they're usually wrong. People don't have enough information, or don't see the whole picture, or they're too excited. They want to report something, but remember, not all information is good information. Better to hear them say, "we have a situation developing here," than for them to fill the air with bogus reports. Second, remember what you hear and apply your own experience. In this manner, when I heard someone report their vehicle down and that they'd be back on the road in one-half hour, I always multiplied the estimate by three and then added forty-five minutes. Thus I knew I could expect them, in this case, in two-plus hours.

By the way, "consider the source" also means listening to the troops. Often, it is the younger troops and officers who have some of the best ideas, and their input is important to the organization. Hence a leader should be out listening a lot.

This principle of "consider the source" also applies to one's self. Can those who receive your word trust it completely? What's your track record? As an officer or an NCO, does your word mean something? If it doesn't, you're in the wrong business. Do you do everything in your power to ensure that once your word is given, the task will be accomplished?

**Never Hire Ms. Buxley As Your Secretary.** Now this may appear to be flippant, talking about the lovely Ms. Buxley, General Halfrack's secretary in *Beetle Bailey*. There's a larger principle at work here, and one not necessarily connected to the sexual crises in the Department of Defense today.

Officers and NCOs are expected to be upright and conduct themselves appropriately. I like to use the phrase, 'be squeaky clean.' They are in leadership positions, and expect soldiers to follow them. If a leader doesn't do the right thing, how can he expect the organization to do the right thing? We take on a considerable burden when we are leaders. Leadership by example should mean something, both in our personal and professional lives. Too many leaders seem to separate the two, when in fact they are inseparable and, as important, the troops know it. Concentrate on your profession, and do the right thing.

We are called to a higher standard and should do our best to meet it. I remember participating in a training exercise in which the leadership decided that the particular training was too difficult for the cadets, who were in great shape and highly motivated. The boss wanted to crank the training back a couple of notches

so everyone could complete it. This sort of approach is the lowest common denominator approach to training, and is directly opposed to training that challenges the soldier. What is the lesson learned by the neophyte leader undergoing the training? Well, it might be that if this is the toughest training I am called upon as a leader to receive, surely I can't ask more of my soldiers when I get in a position of leadership. Thus starts the slippery slope of allowing training standards to slip.

**Don't Pick Up Anything Man-Made on the Battlefield.** There are a lot of ways to look at this principle. The most obvious is beware of booby-traps or unexploded ordnance. But more important is the concept of discipline. The battlefield is a dangerous place for all sorts of reasons, and the Army is serious business. If a soldier is not disciplined and well trained, when sounds and sights and smells of a heretofore unknown nature happen all around him, he is in trouble. That's why the Army has SOPs, battle drills, rules of war, etc., to help when all hell breaks loose.

Good leaders stress these procedures and tough training and then throw in different conditions to see how their soldiers react to change. An infantry squad about to embark on a practice patrol could instead be taken to the post swimming pool and told to make a stream crossing. How does the squad leader react to the unexpected? Can he get everyone to the other side? Does he get rattled? What does he learn from the challenge and about himself?

On another level, an old platoon sergeant once taught me a very important lesson involving this principle. The battlefield is nasty and different, and most normal people react to it with some amount of shock, even with the best discipline and training. Before, during, and after the battle, leadership plays its role. The importance of leadership before and during is quite obvious. But after the battle, its presence is equally significant. The leaders must make the rounds of their soldiers and look each one in the eye, see how they're doing, and tell them what happened. The leaders should point out that a certain amount of shock and withdrawal is normal, and that the soldier's training and discipline is working. The leaders help the soldiers recover from the shock of battle and prepare them to continue. I think human touch here is most important, holding onto a soldier's shoulder while talking to him and making sure he's all right. That human presence and touch keeps the soldier on an even keel and gives the leader a chance to assess his unit's condition.

It's impossible in such a short piece to say all that needs to be said. But soldiers should take great pride in their service. In a small way these three principles indicate what leadership in the Army is really all about.

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My sainted mother would probably have added an Irish principle to this list, "Our reward is not on this earth." It's a good one for Army life, but that's for another day...

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