

Supercargo NCOIC

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4ID Supercargo, 02/12/2003 through 04/11/2003

91W4O, Medical NCO, 2-8 IN, 2nd BDE, 4ID



25 September 2006

Class #57

Abstract

The United States Army regards senior noncommissioned officers as leaders regardless of MOS. I was a medical NCO and the team leader for 11 infantrymen tasked to guard the battalion's equipment on a ship bound for Turkey. The task should have taken 12 days but we sailed with the crew of 27 merchant marines for 58 days before landing in Kuwait with only minimal communication with our unit. My challenges included earning the respect of the Infantrymen, gaining acceptance with the sailors, combating boredom, and sustaining the mission for an extended time. Our mission was success and the leadership lessons that I learned on that mission stay with me today.

Context

In November of 2002, I was a SFC Medical NCO assigned to 2-8 Infantry, 2nd Brigade, 4th Infantry Division. I served as the medical platoon sergeant responsible for 42 medics and the health and welfare of an infantry battalion from March 2001 through October 2002. I stepped aside when one of my SSGs became a SFC. I was waiting to move to the 2BCT medical NCO slot. That is when the division informed of upcoming deployment and the initiation of stop-loss. I became the excess medical NCO in the BDE doing odd jobs for the Bn CSM. In Feb 2003 the CSM made me the Team Leader for 11 infantrymen and one medic. Our mission was to accompany the brigade's equipment on a ship to Turkey and insure the safety of the ship's crew.

The line companies were forced to give me 3 NCOs and 8 lower enlisted soldiers. The HHC gave up a medic for the mission. I received a mix of good soldiers and problem children that other leaders did not want to deal with. We were armed with personal weapons and 2 fifty cal. machine guns. We sailed on a ship with a crew 27 merchant marines. I reported directly to the ship's captain and had complete autonomy and authority over the Soldiers assigned to the security detail.

We sailed from Corpus Christi, TX on 12 February 2003 with a scheduled arrival date in Turkey of 25 February 2003. Turkey closed its ports to us and we sailed in a holding pattern in the Black Sea until 01 April. We finally arrived in Kuwait on 11 April after 58 days at sea. During our voyage our mission did not change but sustaining it became tougher as time elapsed. Although I was the senior ranking NCO and a combat veteran, I had to prove that a medic could lead "grunts." The longer we sailed the more frequently we had conflicts with the ship's crew. The biggest challenge was overcoming boredom. Life on the ship was the same every day, we did not know when the mission would end, we had limited contact with family members, and

claustrophobia became a problem. For 58 days we pulled guard duty and trained 24 hours a day without knowing when our mission would end.

Body

In the Army every NCO is considered a leader regardless of MOS. Theoretically, an NCO from any career management field (CMF) has the tools to lead a Soldier from a different CMF. Soldiers initially respect rank, regardless of how they feel about the NCO. However, eventually every Soldier tests their leaders. In the military we instinctively exploit weaknesses. I know of very few soldiers that don't eventually challenge their leaders. It may not be a blatant challenge but the soldier wants to know if the leader is strong. If an NCO cannot stand his or her ground then that NCO loses his or her power base and becomes ineffective. The Soldiers in each CMF takes pride in their corps. Infantrymen often say that if you "ain't a grunt, you ain't shit." They believe that combat arms soldiers are the Army's true soldiers and the other MOSs are there to support them. Along with this belief comes the unspoken assumption that the other MOSs are somehow weaker than theirs. As a medic, I was a combat service support soldier. It became evident that both the NCOs and the Soldiers in my charge doubted that a medic could really lead infantrymen.

My first goal was to prove to the three infantry NCOs (one SSG and two SGTs) that I was in charge and capable of performing in my role as an NCOIC of a security detail. I brought infantry manuals with me and studied common infantry tactics. I established the standards for their behavior, made them adhere to those standards, and kept the same standards myself. I was open to advice but was the final word on all decisions. I ensured that the NCOs were confident that I could perform my duties and back up my orders and directives. I took great pains to earn their respect; without them backing me I would never gain the full confidence of the soldiers.

win over the soldiers. My biggest tool was my experiences from Desert Storm. I deployed as a line medic with 8ID. The NCOs respected my wartime experiences and this gave me a foundation on which to build.

We stopped in Crete twice for stores. The first time we stayed for two days and dismounted the guards. We had shore leave for 10 hours each day. We were under strict rules not to drink and I let the NCOs supervise the soldiers while they were on shore. The only one that drank alcohol was one of my SGTs. He drank beers in front of the soldiers and the crew and said that he didn't give a damn about my orders. When I found out about it I made an example out of him. All the soldiers watched to see how I would handle the blatant insubordination and I made him into my special project. I put him on guard duty with the lower enlisted soldiers and put a CPL in his place and the sergeant of the guard. I worked with him daily and it only took 48 hours before he broke down and apologized in front of the Soldiers. It was sincere and the team treated me a little differently after that. I had their respect but lost some of the trust of the other NCOs. I eventually gained back the trust but never lost the respect.

The medic assigned to the team had weak medical and soldier skills. He was an inexperienced medic that soon became a target. He was the only one who got seasick during stormy weather and had a few emotional problems during the voyage. The other soldiers lost respect for him both personally and professionally. They started coming to me with their aches and pains and resented him because he "didn't do anything." I took extra time to train him as a medic and a Soldier. We assembled the ship's hospital for the CPT. He spent his extra time researching and practicing medical tasks. Everything the grunts did, he did as well, except for pulling guard duty. He improved but the lower enlisted infantrymen never really accepted him as part of the team. They thought of him as a "medic who couldn't hang with the grunts."

There were 27 merchant marines on board the ship. At first, they accepted us as a necessity and they were thankful that we were there. However, familiarity breeds contempt. As time progressed, they became used to us and resentments and other problems arose.

The merchant marines are not a military organization but they do have a rank structure similar to the military's. The Captain, his mates, and the chief engineers are the officers. There are enough of them to staff three 8-hour shifts. Then there is the Bosun's Mate who is similar to a Sergeant Major. He is in charge of the "enlisted" sailors. The sailors worked either in the engine room or above deck. The majority of the workers seemed to be bikers who shipped out to earn enough money to live sustain them on shore for a year or so before going back to sea for another rotation.

The Soldiers interacted with the crew but I kept them busy enough to make the interaction minimal. I worked with the Captain and he allocated an area away from the rest of the crew for us to train and relax. He also marked an area that was strictly for the sailors. I used some of the same teambuilding techniques to gain acceptance with the crew that I used to build our own team's morale and esprit de corps. When the sailors started to look on at us as "freeloaders" and "passengers", I made sure that they saw us pull our own weight. We maintained our own areas and cleaned up after ourselves. Besides our own duties of guarding the ship and training, we offered to assist the crew with some of the ship's details. We helped load stores onto the boat and I became the crew's unofficial medic. When one of the cooks passed a kidney stone for the first time, I made the diagnosis and treated the pain. We trained the crewmembers on the use of their new pistols/batons and allowed them to join in some of our physical training sessions. After this, we encountered very few problems and by the end of the mission, most of the crew respected us. I still maintain contact with the CPT.

The biggest challenge was overcoming the boredom. Two Soldiers were on guard duty at all times. This was not necessary while we were in the Black Sea but it helped to keep them occupied. Otherwise, we would have been passengers for over a month and that would have caused even more resentment with the crew. But the soldiers still had too much time on their hands.

I made the NCOs develop training schedules and we conducted classes 6 days a week. We held PT six days a week as well. We set up an obstacle course in the belly of the ship with ropes and cargo nets for climbing. We practiced repelling down the ropes. I kept the schedule tight and made meals mandatory. Otherwise, the soldiers would sleep all day and prowl the ship looking for food and an outlet for their boredom at night.

We worked on teambuilding. Everyone gave classes, everyone instructed PT. I made myself out to be hard but fair and most of my NCOs followed suit. The soldiers did as they were told (mostly) but were not afraid to come to approach us with problems.

We did not have a reliable source for news. The uncertainty of what was happening in Iraq and not knowing when and where we would land was hurting morale. None of us had talked to our family members for a month. The ship had one satellite connection for email and emergency calls. We worked a deal with the CPT. He allowed us to write emails on an extra computer, save them onto a disk, and give the disk to the 3rd Mate. The mate would transmit them every morning and print any replies from the night before. This was a great morale builder and relieved much of the stress created by uncertainty.

Lessons Learned/Insight

Regardless of MOS an NCO is a leader. He or she must overcome perceptions, beliefs, and anything else that gets in the way of effective leadership. Without compromising integrity

an NCO can prove that he or she has the ability to lead anyone, regardless of MOS.

Teambuilding works with any team, military or civilian. The effort to overcome misconceptions and prove self-sufficiency always pays off.

Boredom and uncertainty are liabilities in any situation. Keep Soldiers busy, keep them healthy, give them structure and guidelines. Earn their trust and be there to help with any problems/concerns that they may have. No matter the situation, these simple rules are always effective.