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MILITARY SPIRIT: CLAUSEWITZ AND UNITS OF
EXCELLENCE

BY

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the military profession, leadership, and sociology provide some interesting insights. These eight pillars are historically sound and should be used as the basic teaching points for leaders at all levels. The battalion commander was the key to these successful battalions and raises the question of whether we pick the right people to be battalion and brigade commanders. These pillars could be used to evaluate the true military spirit of a unit which Clausewitz feels to be important. Other recognized points were: leadership techniques should be natural and not adopted; competition should be against standards and not other units; and hard, realistic training fully supports family support development. The consequences of the creation and maintenance of the moral fiber of our organizations cannot be overlooked.

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USAWC MILITARY STUDIES PROGRAM PAPER

MILITARY SPIRIT: CLAUSEWITZ AND UNITS OF EXCELLENCE

INDIVIDUAL ESSAY

by

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ABSTRACT

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A study of excellence in combat arms battalions of the US Army by three Army officers doing postgraduate work found the following eight pillars of excellence common to seven identified, outstanding battalions: lead by example; focus on combat, a shared value; power down; strong unit identity; caring with a capital C; high standards and discipline; teamwork, a way of life; and consistent excellent performance. A comparison of what the great Prussian general, Carl von Clausewitz and noted scholars of today on the subjects of the military profession, leadership, and sociology provide some interesting insights. These eight pillars are historically sound and should be used as the basic teaching points for leaders at all levels. The battalion commander was the key to these successful battalions and raises the question of whether we pick the right people to be battalion and brigade commanders. These pillars could be used to evaluate the true military spirit of a unit which Clausewitz feels to be important. Other recognized points were: leadership techniques should be natural and not adopted; competition should be against standards and not other units; and hard, realistic training fully supports family support development. The consequences of the creation and maintenance of the moral fiber of our organizations cannot be overlooked.

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MILITARY SPIRIT: CLAUSEWITZ AND UNITS OF EXCELLENCE

Over the past few years, much has been written about maneuver warfare and the operational level of war. General William R. Richardson, the Commander of the US Army Training and Doctrine Command, has recently written about the Air Land Battle in 1986 in reference to the soon to be published, revised Army Field Manual (FM) 100-5, Operations. He describes clarifications and minor changes as well as stresses the importance of this doctrinal manual to the Army. In his introduction he makes the following valuable comment:

Psychological preparation enjoins the leader to commit himself to professional excellence and to develop the tactical and technical competence which lay the foundation for both the leader's confidence and the unit's cohesion and successful performance.¹

This "psychological preparation" is crucial to the success of our military during the next conflict. Is the military guilty of spending too much time and effort on doctrine and equipment issues and not enough on those key endeavors related to the moral fiber of the individual soldier and his unit? Most agree the next war will be a violent, fast paced affair, using technically sophisticated equipment which all will severely test the abilities and fortitude of the individual and his organization. We cannot afford to pay too little attention to the military spirit of the unit or be confused to the true nature of the problem as some have suggested regarding the beliefs of many senior military officials on the matter of leadership versus management.

Even the great Prussian general and military philosopher, Karl von Clausewitz, writes about the morale and psychological aspects of units

and the consequences of this quality on the battlefield. An examination of his beliefs compared to those of current writers on the subject of leadership and the military way of life and with the elements found in military units noted for their excellence should assist in reviewing this "psychological preparation" which most agree to be of significant distinction.

As Clausewitz has many acute views on the actual conduct of battles, so are his insights on the military spirit of units. He writes that strategy is the use of engagements for the purpose of war. The elements which affect the engagement are the following: moral (intellectual and psychological qualities/influences); physical (size, composition, armament of the force); mathematical (angle of lines of operation, the convergent and divergent movements wherever geometry enters into their calculation); geographical (terrain, mountains, rivers, woods, roads); and statistical (support and maintenance). These moral elements as seen by Clausewitz are among the most important in war and make up the spirit which permeates war as a whole. He also feels they cannot be classified or counted, but must be seen and felt. The need for these virtues become greater the more complex the operation and as the forces are dispersed. These beliefs will be discussed more in depth as they are related to ideas on what makes units excellent.²

A recent study on excellence in combat arms battalions within the Army was conducted by three Army officers as part of their studies at the Naval Postgraduate School. They sought to find how general officers evaluated and determined their best battalions and why these units were excellent. Over forty-five senior leaders were interviewed, with seven battalions from five different Army divisions being closely examined.

These battalions were identified by their chain of command as truly outstanding units. Several days were spent with each battalion with over 200 enlisted soldiers and officers being interviewed. New concepts were seen as well as many traditional ones.³

These officers found eight pillars of excellence common to the seven battalions--lead by example; focus on combat, a shared value; power down; strong unit identity; caring with a capital C; high standards and discipline; teamwork, a way of life; and consistent excellent performance. General officers were really attuned to units and helped establish good command climates along with brigade and battalion commanders. There was no systemic method to identify the best units. The important role of families and the treatment of the whole soldier were prevalent. Competition against standards and not other units was essential. The battalion commander was the critical factor with his method of leadership being the calm, relatively quiet man who demanded high standards and lived them. The commanders adjusted leadership techniques to needs of subordinates. Realistic training was paramount along with personnel stability. These findings will be addressed in further detail.⁴

Leadership By Example

The first pillar, leadership by example, is certainly nothing new to any student of leadership or the military profession, but since it is the essence of leading, one must continue to revisit the issue. The study of excellence found the battalion commander to be the key to this pillar within the unit. Not only does he lead by example, but he did not excite easily, he shared hardships, he was visible, he listened to his people, he let people do their jobs, and he accepted bad news.

Quite clearly, the commander set the tone for the chain of command. This study indicated surprise that these battalion commanders were the quiet, low keyed person instead of the hard nosed commander often viewed as the only real style for a combat leader.⁵

Although Clausewitz does not directly address leading by example, he does discuss the role of the leader. As mentioned earlier of how significant he viewed the moral elements, he sees the skill of the commander being one of the three elements. The other two being the experience and courage of the troops coupled with their patriotic spirit. Where one of these elements is absent, it must be replaced by one of the other such as the superior ability of the commander.⁶

As would be expected, much has been written about this pillar. Samuel Huntington sees the skill of the officer as neither a craft (which is primarily mechanical) nor an art (which required unique and nontransferable talent) but as an extraordinarily complex intellectual skill requiring comprehensive study and training.⁷ A study of leadership in the North Vietnamese, United States, Soviet, and Israeli Armies showed strong traits of a strict code of ethics requiring leaders to share danger and hardship, of leader influence through expertise and as a source of information, and of leader influence through referent power. This same author feels leadership is probably the most important consideration in building cohesive units and requires intensive face-to-face contact between the leader and subordinate.⁸ Even about the comments regarding the low keyed form of leadership, this should not be of a surprise. General S. L. A. Marshall talks of many great leaders who were straightforward and natural. Their naturalness having much to do with their hold on their men.⁹ Still another writer states the

idea that one must be macho to get ahead in today's organization is just that--false grit. Leadership success depends upon being able to size up the organization and develop the flexibility to respond.¹⁰ Morris Janowitz talks of the acceptance of the various authorities to which the soldier is subjected and that officers were warned against senseless insults directed against their men.¹¹ All of these writings support the study of excellence to include traits normally associated with the quiet, low keyed form of leadership.

The study on excellent battalions clearly reaffirms the importance of leading by example. It is hard to carry out this principle if not fully skilled in the profession which Clausewitz views as critical. Being one's self in leading soldiers is often overlooked and many officers feel there is a certain macho role model which must be followed. Even if this particular study which viewed seven different battalion commanders found a common form of quiet, low keyed leadership, it appears the more relevant finding should be to use a natural form of leadership based on living those high standards which have been set forth by the commander. However, the form of leadership which is natural to the leader should not be one which degrades or belittles the subordinate.

Focus on Combat: A Shared Value.

The second pillar deals with the "focus on combat" and how the value is shared by all the members. The vision came from the battalion commander, which geared everything to its number one priority, preparation for combat. Of note was the fact this value was shared by the entire battalion. These units all had a sense of purpose whether it be a real world deployment mission or based on their training events.

Even the units which did not have a deployment mission were able to develop combat preparation as their focus. Realistic training was their azimuth for the battalion. Live fire training was the center of their preparing for war. The magnitude of this aspect cannot be over emphasized.¹²

As mentioned earlier, Clausewitz felt strongly about military spirit and feels there are two sources for this spirit and they must interact for the creation. The first is a series of victorious wars and the second being the frequent exertion of the army to the utmost limits of its strength. He further states this spirit can be created only in war and by great generals, though admittedly it may endure, for several generations at least, even under generals of average ability and through long periods of peace. It is not the purpose of this paper to debate whether this spirit for the United States military was created during World War II, Korea, or even Vietnam nor whether our general officers over the past 40 plus years have nurtured this spirit. However, one can suggest that dangerous, realistic training, where a unit is taxed to its limits as found in the study of excellence does relate to this creation principle as stated by Clausewitz. He also felt the more heavy demands placed on soldiers, the more you can depend on their response.¹³

The study of the German Army of World War II by Morris Janowitz highlights several ideas reference the significance of shared values. He found the German soldier was likely to go on fighting, provided he had the weapons, as long as the group possessed leadership with which he could identify, and felt a part of the unit. One factor which strengthened primary group solidarity was community experience as a cohesive force.¹⁴ Focusing on one paramount value, preparing for

combat, could be used effectively to make the members feel a part of the unit as well as developing a common experience upon which to develop strong cohesion.

The far reaching effect of a shared value within a battalion size force cannot be taken lightly. This vehicle can bring all efforts and strengths of an organization to bear on their main function in life. In a combat arms unit, this can result in extremely realistic, demanding training which Clausewitz views as a factor in creating military spirit. This intense sharing of a common value also leads to a strong bond amongst its members as their purpose is very clear. This pillar has much potential which can be over shadowed by the day-to-day peacetime and administrative requirements placed on units.

Power Down

The third pillar of excellence, power down, was a term widely used at Fort Hood, Texas during the past few years, but it correctly applied to the seven combat arms battalions examined. Power down was defined as a superb command climate where subordinates are trusted and allowed to grow. Again, the battalion commander was the decisive factor in creating this type of environment. In these excellent battalions, the company commanders had the autonomy to run their units. Depending on the abilities of the subordinate, there were different degrees of power down. The better battalion commanders told what they wanted and not how to do it. People were trusted to use their own initiative and abilities to accomplish the mission. This process develops good independent leaders who know they are allowed to make mistakes and learn from them. The noncommissioned officer plays an influential role in these better

organizations. He was permitted to do his job, as is often discussed in military circles, but seldom done.¹⁵

Although Clausewitz does not write directly about command climate, several of the more pertinent points he mentions could be better generated and cultivated in organizations with healthy environments. The experience and courage of troops along with their patriotic spirit are two of the three moral elements which he deemed as so vital. Certainly a strong case could be made that the atmosphere of the units visited by our three Army writers would be most advantageous to these two moral elements. Clausewitz discusses the positive effects of discipline, pride, and high morale on a fighting group.¹⁶ Could these traits not be better fostered in an arena where all leaders are trusted and allowed to err? It does appear prudent to say many of the notions of Clausewitz could be better fulfilled in a healthy command climate.

A noted author, James MacGregor Burns, writes about moral leadership where leaders and the led have a connection not only of power, but also of mutual needs, aspirations, and values. The leaders are totally committed to their responsibilities. This kind of leadership can produce social change. He also writes about transforming leadership which is more complex but very potent. The leader recognizes the needs of his followers. The leader looks for potential motives to satisfy higher needs and engage the full person of the led. The result is a relationship of mutual stimulation where the followers become leaders and even some leaders may become moral agents.¹⁷ Burns writes of the brute power of these leadership types and most of the basic characteristics of the power down climate found in the study of excellent battalions are very similar to those listed by Burns.

Another important aspect of power down dealt with effective communications at all levels. In his writings of the Vietnam conflict, General Bruce Palmer stated Americans will fight even under severe conditions as long as they understand the necessity for it.¹⁸ Even during this controversial period of our history, effective communications could overcome many strong adverse influences. A healthy command climate does increase the communications flow at all levels.

The working environment is something most leaders readily understand, but the full, potential power of this aspect may not be totally appreciated. The climate does have an influence on all the other pillars of excellence as described in the study. This study surely suggests that leaders at all levels must pay close attention to the command climate and do all in their power to ensure its consummate potential is reached.

Strong Unit Identity

Unit pride was a striking factor found in the battalions of excellence. The chain of command placed great emphasis on the positive. Their innovative training and hard physical activities were geared towards creating winners. The peer pressure of the battalions exhorted unit pride. They trained as combined arms teams with special weight placed on realistic, live fire exercises. Risk taking was encouraged. These units all had a strong identity based on uniqueness and not gimmicks.¹⁹

Professional pride is the bond between the various natural forces that activate the military virtues according to Clausewitz. He thinks it is a serious mistake to underrate professional pride. Discipline,

skill, a certain pride, and high morale are the attributes of an army trained in times of peace as viewed by the Prussian general.²⁰

Studies of infantrymen during World War II show the higher an individual's morale, the more willing he is for combat. The ability of a unit to stick together under stress was due to his individual esprit and the cohesiveness of the group.²¹ Morale is a resultant of interpersonal relationships dependent upon loyalty to each other, their leader, and the group as a whole. Men fight for each other or for someone rather than against an enemy.²² Other writers talk about the strong confidence and pride of units which feel they are unique like airborne units.²³

Clausewitz was indeed correct when he said not to underrate professional pride. For the soldier, this pride relates to his unit and what it represents to him. Unit pride and identity is probably a force of which we do not take advantage. The US Army has provided a vehicle to improve this shortcoming by the implementation of the Regimental System. The regiments selected all have long, historical records of great accomplishments in war and peace. This lineage can be used to build identity and pride. Many such organizations as the cavalry and the airborne have been doing this most effectively for years. Unit identity can also be based on current real world missions which can do much to inspire and gain the devotion of each soldier. We should not be confused with gimmicks such as distinctive uniforms to develop unit pride. The Army has been guilty of sophomoric approaches to unit identity. Not every unit can be elite, but all can have a strong pride based on the character of their organization.

Caring With a Capital C

In the excellent battalions, the soldiers know they were cared for. They also knew if the concern was genuine. Timely and frequent recognition provided positive reinforcements. Pay problems were of immediate concern to the chain of command. The leadership listened to the soldiers and the entire chain of command. The soldiers were treated like winners. They were allowed to attend schools which often is not the case regarding the Army in general. Strong family support groups have become significant combat multipliers. Much, serious attention was given to these support groups and the soldiers greatly appreciated these endeavors. The Grenada experience helped to bring these groups to the attention of the key leaders.²⁴

In the days of Clausewitz, there was not the concern for the personal needs of the soldier as there has been in more contemporary times. However, there is a real danger with missing the true meaning of caring for the soldier. Clausewitz discussed grim severity and iron discipline being able to preserve military virtues of a unit. He discussed the pride gained from hardships and how the experience and courage of the troops was one of the principal moral elements.²⁵ These beliefs are gained by consistent, realistic training. It is easy to reduce training from the already over burdened schedule so more time and effort can be devoted for "caring" concerns. One must not forget that high standards, firm discipline, and demanding training are also mandatory ways to care for the soldiers. A busy, well trained soldier carries his satisfaction over to his family life. These facts of soldiering should not be missed.

Sociologist Charles C. Moskos found in the late 1960's that the military was not family oriented, the married soldier felt the armed

forces were deficient in recognizing the needs of families, but the immediate future would see an expansion of family services.²⁶ Statistics show the US military has been transformed from an organization of a high proportion of unmarried personnel to one in which the majority are married and have children with the most dramatic change in the enlisted category.²⁷ Morris Janowitz mentions in his well known book on the military profession of the 1960's that there was concerted effort to strengthen family relations.²⁸ Although the military family is only one aspect of caring for the soldier, it is discussed here as it has only been during the last twenty plus years, that the military leadership has truly recognized this aspect of soldiering. Also, it has only been in the last few years that family concerns have moved from a post responsibility to more of a chain of command responsibility.

The study of excellent battalions reiterated many of the essential features of caring for the soldier which are understood by most, but the role of family support groups as a combat multiplier is of unique interest. These groups have brought the previously mentioned shared values of the battalion to the wives. Of course, this can be a strength, but there are possible, serious pitfalls. The soldier must not see these functions as an infringement upon his household and its power structure. If viewed this way, the family support group now becomes a detriment. A requirement for over involvement by the battalion staff and chain of command can lead to inefficiency in other functions of the battalion. There is indeed a fine line to walk in this area and the family support groups need further, detailed scrutiny before firm guidelines should be pronounced on their conduct. In the

Army of today, it is apparent that there is much to be gained by having viable family support groups.

High Standards and Discipline

High standards and discipline form the sixth pillar which the study of excellent battalions found to be really one attribute. They felt standards and discipline could not be separated. Strong discipline must exist to ensure tough standards are met and the results of reaching these norms is firm discipline. The examined battalions disciplined themselves to do things right all the time and to do those things which prepare for war. They set high but obtainable standards which were their own and not those of the Army. Peaking for events was avoided. Their standards were reachable so as not to compromise integrity. Discipline was the hallmark of these units. It was administered fairly but swiftly. All the tools to correct behavior were used and the consequences of these disciplinary actions were fully understood by all. Their level of unit and individual discipline created a responsive attitude throughout the battalion. The chain of command did not spend a lot of time with the bad soldiers. High standards and discipline were the foundations for excellence in these units.²⁹

Clausewitz saw the need for firm discipline. He discussed how the soldier had the natural tendency for unbridled action which must be subordinated to demands of a higher kind (obedience, order, rule, and method). Grim severity and iron discipline may be able to preserve the military virtues of a unit according to Clausewitz. He also had strong feelings about standards. The more demands placed on a soldier, the more you could depend on his response. As mentioned earlier about creating the military spirit of a unit, he felt one ingredient was

frequent exertions to the utmost limit of a unit's strength. Can this be done without high standards?³⁰

A British Air Vice Marshal, John Downey, has some perceptive thoughts on discipline, which are closely related to standards. He states that it is often accepted that discipline is virtually the be all and end all of military life. However, one must look at certain factors when discussing discipline. Every human organization needs some form of discipline, but the form and extent of it must vary according to prevailing attitudes, the basic nature of the job at hand, and the immediate needs of any particular moment.³¹

The British officer raises several issues which should not be forgotten. The importance of discipline and standards should not be just accepted as fact, but closely studied so one knows how to set and adjust standards and reach and maintain them with strong discipline. Often discipline is associated with harsh treatment which may not be what is needed at a particular place in time. All aspects of discipline must be understood so as to effectively establish an atmosphere where people understand its purpose and seek discipline. Excellent units create a responsiveness in their people with discipline and standards becoming personal traits of individual members.

Teamwork, a Way of Life

The next to last pillar of the study of excellence dealt with teamwork. The overriding theme of these units was to do things as a team. The staff and companies worked together. The commanders and senior noncommissioned officers were a close group. Competition was under control. The excellent battalions compete against standards, not

each other. This kind of competition within the battalion produced five winners, not just one.³²

Clausewitz does not write specifically on teamwork, but several of the attributes which he discusses would be hard to obtain in today's environment without this team effort. His earlier mentioned ideas on obedience, order, rule, and method are better enhanced by partisanship. Professional pride is maintained by cooperation. Teamwork can nurture boldness which Clausewitz stresses as a critical factor of planning.³³

One unusual feature of cohesion deals with the comprehensive surveillance and reporting system as described by Darryl Henderson. He talks about this system going down to the smallest unit to detect deviant behavior and serves as a basis for bringing pressure to bear to preserve cohesion.³⁴ Whether this is a conscious aspect of teamwork or not, it certainly surfaces as a possibility which could have significant positive influence.

Teamwork is another pillar which can aid or hinder the other pillars discussed in the study of excellence. Probably, teamwork would not be ranked as the most decisive trait of a great unit, but in a dynamic, violent battle where other traits are removed or weakened, cooperation could well be the cement which keeps the organization together and aimed towards mission accomplishment.

Consistent Excellent Performance

The last pillar, consistent excellent performance, is not agreed to by all. The study found these units to be superb performers in everything they did. They had good written procedures in place which were working. Their soldiers knew the standards and goals. These units did not peak, but maintained all areas at an acceptable level year

round. They possessed a high idling ability which allowed them to move into high gear when need be.³⁵

Maybe this unique idling ability is related to perseverance. Clausewitz writes how man under pressure tend to give in to physical and intellectual weakness, where only great strength of will can lead to the objective.³⁶ He truly appreciated the seriousness of perseverance. Possibly these units of excellence developed their own iron will which kept them on top of all endeavors.

Thomas Peters and Robert Waterman in their now famous book, In Search of Excellence, talk about the quality of persistence. Successful businessmen are committed to the values of their organization and are extraordinarily persistent in reinforcing these values. Persistence is vital.³⁷

Although the study of excellent units did not cite perseverance as one of the factors of consistent superior performance, a position can be taken that an iron will, whether of the leader or the organization itself, is paramount to consistency of this nature. With the extreme, outside influences which affect a military organization, it is easy to accept mediocrity at times. Only with dogged determination and a will to accept nothing less than conspicuous results can a consistency of this nature be preserved.

Final Comments

The study of excellent combat arms battalions conducted by the three Army officers at the Naval Postgraduate School provides some very useful insights. Their eight pillars of excellence are surely worth study and examination. Many of their findings are already known and much has been written about them by authors of various backgrounds and fields of

expertise. However, a review of these principles can lead to improvement and a discovery of new techniques and policies.

A common theme throughout their study was the significant role played by the battalion commander. One would assume this, but not to the degree as indicated by their scrutiny. There is, of course, one obvious question. Do we in fact select the most qualified officers to be our commanders? When lives are at stake and the destiny of our country could be influenced, the answer to this question dictates serious consideration. Are our battalion and brigade commanders evaluated on their product, the readiness of their unit, or do our general officers develop their views based on gut feeling and the mannerisms of these key subordinates? Do our bosses really look for the military spirit of a unit which Clausewitz feels is so important? In the study of unit excellence, the authors felt the general officers were attuned to the units they commanded. With the large number of units rated by say, a division commander, to judge this military spirit would be a monumental task. Is this really done?

The study was surprised at the leadership form of these seven battalion commanders. Here lies a good lesson. Although the form for these commanders was quiet, low keyed, the point to be learned is to be oneself. Be natural.

The role of competition was another lesson to be learned. The military, by its very nature is a competitive beast, but what one competes against is the consideration. Competition against standards, not units, produces more winners and leads to an attitude of strength.

Let us not overlook the force to be found in unit pride. Many divisions today are effectively using the great reputation of their

units based on historical evidence to foster unit identity. This same power can also be gained based on real world missions of today's organizations. Clausewitz felt it would be unwise to underrate this strength.

Family support group functions were found to be a combat multiplier. Since our Army has a tendency to go to extremes, let us not forget that hard, realistic training also has a positive effect on the family. The soldier, who enjoys the confidence that he and his unit are fully qualified to meet all their missions, takes home to his family a feeling of job satisfaction. This fulfillment has a healthy impact on the relationships within the family cell.

These eight pillars of excellence can be tools to help in our search for this military spirit as described by Clausewitz. A commander can use them to assess his outfit, develop training and other programs, and evaluate mission accomplishment. One certainly does not want higher headquarters to dictate a laundry list of items upon which a boss will judge his subordinates. However, these pillars do provide areas of concern where more than a cursory review should be applied.

During a period of momentous changes in Army doctrine and force modernization, let us not overlook the creation and maintenance of the moral fiber of our organizations.

ENDNOTES

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3. Major Jerry A. Simonsen, Captain Herbert L. Frandsen, and Captain David A. Hoopengardner, Excellence in the Combat Arms, p. iv.
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5. Ibid., pp. 21 - 23.
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7. Samuel P. Huntington, The Soldier and the State: the Theory & Politics of Civil-Military Relations, p. 13.
8. Wm. Darryl Henderson, Cohesion: The Human Element In Combat, pp. 114 - 115, 149.
9. General S. L. A. Marshall, "Leaders and Leadership," Military Leadership In Pursuit of Excellence edited by Robert L. Taylor and William E. Rosenbach, pp. 45 - 46.
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11. Morris Janowitz, Military Conflict, pp. 195 - 196.
12. Simonsen, Frandsen, and Hoopengardner, pp. 24 - 28.
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17. James MacGregor Burns, Leadership, pp. 24 - 46, 141 - 168.
18. General Bruce Palmer, Jr., The 25-Year War: America's Military Role in Vietnam, p. 70.
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