

Leadership the “Leahy Way”

By Major General Gregg F. Martin

In light of this year being designated “The Year of the NCO,” I felt it would be appropriate to reprint an article I wrote for the October-December 2003 issue of *Engineer*. Looking back through my own career, NCOs have been among my greatest teachers, mentors, and friends—from my squad leaders, platoon sergeants, operations sergeants, and first sergeants when I was a junior officer, to my CSMs who have been my closest and most trusted advisors as a brigade commander and general officer.

I truly value and respect the perspectives, assessments, and wisdom that come from the seasoned, calibrated eyeball of an experienced NCO, as well as the absolutely candid, unvarnished, and truthful advice I know I can always trust and count on.

One of the most effective NCO leaders I have ever known was First Sergeant Edwin Leahy, Bravo Company, 79th Engineer Battalion, based in Karlsruhe, Germany, with whom I was privileged to serve from June 1984 to November 1985.

“Top” Leahy ran our company with a spirit, enthusiasm, and competence that was unmatched in my experience. Thanks in large part to his phenomenal leadership, Bravo Company excelled at just about everything. It seemed that all we touched turned to gold. The Soldiers, NCOs, and officers were fired up with a can-do attitude and sense of pride. Our achievements in warfighting readiness, training, maintenance, partnership, sports, and community support were usually rated “best in the battalion.” We took care of our people and developed them as future leaders. We had fun and enjoyed our time together, whether in the mud, dust, or snow at Grafenwoehr; on the ranges or troop construction missions; in the field; with our allied partnership units; or on the athletic fields. Although Top and I were truly a “team,” there was never any doubt in my mind—or anyone else’s—that Top Leahy was “The Man.”

Let me describe Top Leahy. First, he was an absolutely powerful presence. He exuded confidence, strength, and charisma. He looked old and mean, with a full head of black



hair that he slicked back, 1950s style. He grew up in a rough part of New Hampshire and spoke with a thick Northeastern accent. Except for his tour on “The Trail,” he spent all of his Army time down in the trenches, leading engineer Soldiers. He was a hard man.

Top was respected, admired, loved, and feared—all at the same time. He loved the company and his Soldiers, and no one dared to cross him or mess with his company. His ability to quickly cut through the fog and confusion of events, competing priorities, and complexities never ceased to amaze me. It seemed that a hundred things could be going on, then several crises would hit simultaneously, and Top would instantaneously know what to do, how to do it, and in which priority. He would run his solution by me for input and concurrence, then we would proceed from there. Despite his tough exterior, he always took time to explain

his logic and thought process. In short, he was a wonderful teacher and coach who was developing and mentoring “his” company commander, just as he had mentored his previous commander, then Captain Bob Derrick.

Although we did not have official family readiness groups (FRGs) in those days, Top and his wife did this informally, but very effectively. Mrs. Leahy was the “Company Mom.” She pulled together the NCO, enlisted, and officer wives (the company was all male) on a regular basis to talk business and have fun. The wives became a tight-knit group and took care of their own. She was originally from France, so they had many fun excursions across the border for shopping, restaurants, and sightseeing. When the company deployed, or when tragedy struck, this paid off big time. To this day, my wife says that this informal, close group of wives was the most effective FRG she has ever seen, and the beauty of it was that *they all wanted to get together because it was so much fun.*

Top always loved to have fun. He spoke French and German and was the most enthusiastic participant in partnership activities that I have ever seen. We trained with, did exchanges with, and simply had fun with our allies. Top

never saw a partnership event that he didn't like. And I knew that once we went out the door, it was going to be a late night. We built a tremendous amount of good will and truly enhanced our interoperability, which would have paid off in combat if we had ever fought the "big one" in Central Europe. Moreover, he included junior NCOs and Soldiers in these events, which was a huge morale builder and one of his ways of growing leaders.

Top was strong and robust and had unlimited energy. In terms of technical and tactical competence, there was none better. He expertly ran the company with seeming ease. He knew and could execute every mission flawlessly—from weapons to demolition, to construction, to maintenance. In tense situations, I saw him leap into the fray (even if it was mud or wet concrete)—with spit-shined boots and starched fatigues—and take charge to make sure that the mission got accomplished to standard and that no one got hurt. He taught and coached through his personal example. There was nothing he asked his troops to do that he had not already done or wouldn't do again, and they all knew it.

Top always kept mission accomplishment, concern for his people, and loyalty up, down, and sideways in perfect harmony. He intuitively knew how to do this and was a wonderful coach and advisor to his young commander and lieutenants. Given the operational tempo, the number of competing priorities, and the rapid changes that demanded flexibility and adaptability, I would sometimes hit the frustration level and want to go do battle with folks up at battalion. Top was marvelous in calming me down and channeling my energy into more productive venues (and keeping his Cap'n "from steppin' on it"). On the other hand, when it was time to do battle with higher headquarters, Top let me know, and we often went up to headquarters as a team. And when we did, we rarely lost.

We developed our quarterly training briefs together and briefed as a team from handwritten butcher charts. Top knew exactly how to orchestrate these in such a way that he charmed the battalion commander and command sergeant major and got them to grant Bravo Company much of what we requested. He was brilliant and a true master of how to be totally loyal to me, his Soldiers, the battalion commander, and peers.

What is the relevance of this story? Top Leahy epitomized the NCO Creed. When I think of professional competence—tactical, technical, and leadership—I think of his calibrated and seasoned eyeball, evaluating any situation thrown at him and instantly knowing exactly what to do and how best to handle it. When I think about how to balance mission accomplishment with the welfare of my troops, I often think of



First Sergeant Leahy with author, left, and his other company commander (Colonel Bob Derrick, who was the Bravo Company, 79th Engineer Battalion, commander before then Colonel Martin) on the right, dedicating the 79th Engineer Battalion plaque at ENFORCE 2002.

Top Leahy. When I think about knowing my Soldiers, keeping them informed, and being fair and impartial, I think of him. Top Leahy showed me how to earn the respect and confidence of my superiors as well as my Soldiers.

In short, Top Leahy lived and modeled—on a daily basis—what it meant to be a professional NCO in the U.S. Army. He and his NCOs in Bravo Company gave me and my officers maximum time to accomplish our duties, because we did not have to accomplish theirs. First Sergeant Edwin Leahy showed me—through his life—what it means to be an NCO, "The Backbone of the Army."

Top Leahy is my example of "what right looks like" in an NCO. I want to thank all our NCOs and their Families for their dedication and selfless service in the defense of our nation. NCOs lead the way!

Major General Martin commanded the Bravo "Bulldogs," 79th Engineer Battalion, from June 1984 to November 1985, in Karlsruhe and Grafenwoehr, Germany. At the time this article was originally written, he commanded the 130th Engineer Brigade, of V (U.S.) Corps and CJTF-7, in Iraq.

Author's Note: First Sergeant Edwin S. Leahy (1944-2003) passed away in Rolla, Missouri shortly before this article was written. He was survived by his wife Sandy, four children, one sister, and five grandchildren. His protégés from Bravo Company, 79th Engineer Battalion, include—among a large number of great Americans—Colonel (Retired) Bob Derrick, who went on to command the 307th Engineer Battalion, the 20th Engineer Brigade, and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Transatlantic Command; Colonel Clarence "Dave" Turner, who commanded the 14th Engineer Battalion in Iraq, and the Far East District, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers; and CW5 (Retired) Harold DeBerry, who became the Chief Warrant Officer of the Ordnance Regiment. To this day, we are all still in awe of First Sergeant Leahy.