Lead The Way

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As you know, the Army has announced that this year is "The Year of the NCO," and I'd like to address the Sergeants in our formation. This article is devoted to those great NCOs who taught me how to be a good Soldier and Sergeant and a decent human being.

What I've learned from my Sergeants has had a lasting impression. Without my knowing it, they've dictated the way I train and care for my own Soldiers and their Families. Being an NCO is harder today than it was 10 years ago. A 12- or 15-month deployment leaves you exhausted, physically and mentally. Period. No matter how you slice it, this stuff is hard. The stress of combat, accomplishing the mission, and taking care of Soldiers made me realize that there's a lot of hard work that needs to happen back in garrison to minimize the number of Soldiers wounded in combat. I know the enemy has a say in every engagement, but it's the way my NCOs reacted during those engagements that's carried the day for our unit. And to build a great team, it takes some hard thinking, detailed planning, and solid execution once we start training at R+91.

My NCOs have taught me the value of acting on those hard lessons learned from the last deployment and from our brothers and sisters who are deployed now. I don't have all the answers, but there's a bunch of NCOs in my company who can help me figure this stuff out.

My Sergeant told me that he can't give me his full, undivided attention back in the rear like he did when we were deployed. He has a family that hasn't seen him these past 15 months, and they'd like to get to know their father. That doesn't mean he's going to completely ignore me, but it does mean that I have to behave myself, especially when my Sergeant's not around. He told me I should act like a decent human being. I had no idea what he was talking about, and I asked for clarification. So he sat the entire team down and gave us his philosophy on decency.

He said, "There are usually three things that get Soldiers in trouble—money, women, and compulsive behavior."

"Money is a powerful aphrodisiac, and right now your pocket is burning to spend as much of it as possible, but you've got to have patience. Remember how we took down that IED cell a few months back? It took us about 3 months to do it, but it was worth the effort. We took our time, gathered the intel, developed a plan, and executed it with no collateral damage. Everyone was happy, except the bad guys. Same goes for money. You've got this strong urge to go out and shoot (spend) anything that moves, but in the end you'll just create a lot of collateral damage, a debt you can't manage on your now-taxable private's pay, and everyone's gonna be mad at you, except the bad guys."

"Formal courtesy between a man and a woman is more important than it is between strangers. Never embarrass or tease your girlfriend in front of your buddies or in private. When you're out on the town, your first meeting engagement should be just like we do key leader engagements in-theater. Slow is smooth, and smooth is fast. Do your homework, get to know your subject, and slowly develop a good relationship based on honesty and trust. We don't take advantage of the Sheik's good nature and start putting our own plan into action without his consent. Same goes for a woman. You may think she's flirting with you, but really she's just being nice and conducting her own recon. You'll know you're doing things right if the happiness of your wife or girlfriend is essential to your own happiness. One last thing, you are never authorized to push around or hit a woman. No matter what she says or how drunk or how stupid you get. You can expect the full attention of the entire chain of command, from team leader to battalion commander, if you do."

"Being compulsive means that you're obsessed about one particular thing, and you just take it too far. Being a 'Barracks Rat,' sitting in front of a TV playing video games all weekend is one example. Drinking alcohol to excess is another example. Watching civilians on MTV or the Internet, going to the mall and outfitting your entire wardrobe with clothes that look more like costumes than anything else is another. Putting large plugs in your ears so it looks like you've got two little butts growing out of your earlobes… tattoos…piercings…and the list goes on and on. The object is to not lose your perspective. Just because you're in a combat zone doesn't mean that stuff like hygiene, courtesy to officers, uniform standards, maintenance, awards, reports, and ceremonies stop until we redeploy, now does it? It's the reason we don't keep you on the same equipment for the entire rotation. You'll reach tracer burnout, and it could get you or someone else hurt. Same theory applies back in the rear. You've got to have a wide variety of interests and spread your time out for your Family, your battle buddies, and your duties as a Soldier so you don't burn out on us. You are expected to maintain our standards of uniform, punctuality, weapons, equipment, and good behavior no matter where you are."

Thank you, Sergeant Barajas, lesson learned. I continue to be amazed by what our Sergeants are required to do—in combat and in garrison. It's our duty to ensure that they not only have all the tools in their kit bag to be a successful Sergeant but also to help them sort out their kit bag and train them on how to best use those tools.