

What It Means To Be “A Good Soldier”

By Command Sergeant Major Edgar W. Dahl (Retired)

Editor’s Note: *This article was adapted from Command Sergeant Major Dahl’s farewell speech, which was delivered during his retirement ceremony at Fort Lewis, Washington, in April 2010, after serving more than 27 years in the Army.*

Twenty-one years ago, when I was a brand new drill sergeant, my battalion command sergeant major informed me that the most coveted title in the Army is “A Good Soldier.” He believed that a warrior who was remembered as A Good Soldier was one who had reached the apex of the profession. I remembered that command sergeant major’s words and constantly strived to be the best Soldier I could be as I advanced through the ranks.

Back then, I didn’t know what it took to be A Good Soldier. Was it someone who had spit-shined boots and a starched uniform? Was it someone who had short hair? Was it the guy who could recite regulations and field manuals by heart? Was it someone who was a member of the Audie Murphy Club and the Morales Club? Was it the one who won all of the boards? Was it the student who garnered all of the school awards? I didn’t know.

Certainly, a sharp appearance is important. And if you are an old-school military policeman like me, you undoubtedly understand the past significance of spit-shined boots, starched uniforms, and short hair. But what about out in the field? Did the “poster boy Soldier” fade away when his uniform wasn’t so sharp? Familiarity with regulations and field manuals is important—especially when taking care of other Soldiers. But is memorizing these things as important as knowing where to refer Soldiers when they need guidance? Membership in elite clubs is important, and winning boards is important. But is the ability to spout knowledge while seated in front of a panel of senior noncommissioned officers more important than being able to apply that knowledge?

I thought about what it took to be A Good Soldier, and I began to form my own opinion. In my mind, Good Soldiers never need to be reminded to wash their uniforms, cut their hair, or present a sharp appearance in garrison. They always show up on time, at the right place, in the right uniform, and with the right attitude. Good Soldiers work hard during physical training—not just because they want to achieve a high score, but because someday they might actually be required to haul a heavy can of ammunition to a fellow Soldier who is engaging the enemy or need

to carry a wounded Soldier who is in need of medical treatment. Good Soldiers maintain their equipment and clean their weapons without being told. They perform their precombat checks and inspections. And they are equally prepared for training in the field and for conducting missions downrange.

But above all, Good Soldiers remember that the mission comes first and the welfare of Soldiers comes second. When we try to twist that axiom by adopting “feel good” phrases like “mission first, people always,” we run the risk of sounding apologetic when we require that Soldiers do things that are uncomfortable or dangerous. In the Army, the mission comes first and being a Soldier is inherently difficult.

If your fellow Soldiers like you because you’re a nice guy, but wouldn’t trust you to share a foxhole with them in battle—then you probably need to reexamine your soldiering techniques.

So what do you get from the Army in return for your service as A Good Soldier? Well, there are some tangibles—a paycheck, a place to put your head, and three meals a day. The Army also provides you with clothing, equipment, and a weapon. And these things are certainly important.

But it’s the intangible things that are ultimately most important. When you join the Army, you enjoy a share of the glory, valor, and history that the Army has earned through 234 years of service to the Nation. You become a stitch in the Army flag—a piece of the fabric that was earned through the blood, sweat, and tears that were spent across the globe.

The men and women of Valley Forge, Gettysburg, San Juan Hill, the Argonne, Omaha Beach, Pork Chop Hill, Ia Drang, Grenada, Panama, Mogadishu, Afghanistan, Iraq, and a thousand places in between have passed a legacy on to you. Some of those Good Soldiers are buried on battlefields; their headstones serve as a reminder that, along with the benefits of being a Soldier, there is also a potential price to be paid.

And when you join the Army, you get to experience the camaraderie of other Soldiers who entered military service for their own reasons, but who are now drawn together by a common mission, purpose, and set of values. That same camaraderie—especially if forged and tested in battle—does not exist outside the military.

Your fellow Soldiers share heat, cold, thirst, fatigue, fear, and uncertainty about the future with you. For many, the Army obliterates prejudices and differences in demographics and upbringings and replaces these things with relationships that can only result from being a part of the oldest, most battle-hardened, and most powerful military organization in the Nation.

When you choose to join the Army, you receive the respect and admiration of an entire Nation. Americans love their Soldiers; and while they may disagree with some of the missions, they certainly don't begrudge those who stand in front of the flag, take an oath, and pick up a weapon to execute their assigned task.

Good Soldiers are not swayed by those who constantly gripe about the Army. Yes—in spite of the numerous tangible and intangible benefits provided by the Army, there are always those who find fault with what we do and how we do it. Although the Army is not perfect, it's much better than anything else; and we don't need or want

second-guessers, chronic complainers, or those who are not satisfied with our way of life. So, if you are one of those people, please do not enlist or reenlist.

In the end, the Army wants you to be able to shoot, move, and communicate. The Army wants you to salute, accept your mission, and do your best to accomplish it. And in return, you get to experience the satisfaction of serving your Nation; the privilege of joining the ranks of those who have worn Army green, khaki, or dusty blue; the admiration of your fellow Americans; and the love of your family. And sometimes you even get a warm bed, a hot meal, and a cold beer!

I feel honored and privileged to have served alongside many Good Soldiers and their families for the past 27 years. My hope is that I will be remembered as "A Good Soldier."

God bless you, our wonderful Army, and the United States of America.

Army strong!

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