

THE SETTING

Roll me over easy, boys,
Roll me over slow, ...
Roll me over easy,
Cause my wounds, they hurt me so.

From the folk song
"Frankie and Johnnie"

The General and his staff huddled on the edge of the drop zone, while desultory rifle fire crackled in the distant darkness. They were charged with relaying vital intelligence to the rest of the division before it left departure airfields. Critical decisions hung in the balance.

Precisely on schedule, a lone C-130 swept overhead and belched out its cargo -- a 3/4-ton truck with AM radio. The chute popped in the heavy night air, the load drifted gently down, and Task Force JABO heard it THUNK! in the middle of the DZ. Beautiful.

Everyone, including the General, charged out to de-rig the truck. The driver leaped in, mashed down the starter, and -- nothin' happen.

Absolutely nothing.

He'd forgotten to put water in the battery. Because there was no water in the battery, the truck wouldn't start. Because the truck wouldn't start, the radio wouldn't work. And because the radio wouldn't work, the mission failed.

From the standpoint of combat effectiveness at a given point in time and space, when the chips were down, the whole load might just as well have streamered in.

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Task Force JABO's fiasco during Exercise DARK CLOUD was distinguished only because it took place in Macy's window.¹ Its likes recur every day, from Baltimore to Bagansiapiapi -- embroiling Quartermaster laundry button-smashers, data processing eggheads and power-drunk lairds in the local out-patient clinic. Trace each failure to its source, and you find a noncom who didn't do his job.

Peacetime COMUS capriciousness?

Wish it were.

Tough-minded "Swede" Larsen, Commanding General of Field Force No I, lauded 101st Airborne troopers as the best in Vietnam late last spring.² Scarcely 90 days later, the Brigade Deputy Commander officially foamed at the mouth, scoring a rash of basic training flaws that marred Operation JOHN PAUL JONES: poor noise discipline; lax security on the march and during halts; sloppy personal hygiene.³ Such foolishness, which contributes to needless battle and non-battle casualties, is directly attributable to sluggish noncoms who don't turn loosened screws. This situation, mind you, was in an outfit where command emphasis on fundamentals was so strong that the Brigadier had proudly published excerpt's from his combat-tested tactical SOP, for all the world to see, highlighting just these points.⁴

By inference, less favored forces floundering crotch-deep in Vietnam's monsoon muck also must be saddled with their quotas of lax NCO's.

Does this mean the Army Non-Commissioned Officer Corps is verging on collapse?

Of course not. Pound-for-pound, it's the finest in Army history. There are giants in our midst.

But the sad truth is, noncoms, by and large, are a weaker link in the chain of command than they have any need to be, and have been for years and years.

What do we expect?

Since 1940, high-caliber NCO's have emerged more by accident than design, victims of misguided selection, development and retention policies which couldn't have proved more deadly if they'd been deliberately calculated to spawn and perpetuate mediocrity. Myopic visionaries unconsciously destroyed the rational balance between leaders and the led, ditched promotion by merit in favor of systems stressing time-in-grade, watered down discipline, and in the end, brick-by-brick and stone-by-stone, dismantled all that noncoms once held so dear: responsibility, authority, pride and prestige.

The sparkling wonder of it all is that the NCO Corps survived so well. It stumbled through two full-scale wars and was poised on the brink of a third before Department of the Army belatedly sensed gross blunders, and began striving haphazardly to reverse the trend. Successes have been less than spectacular.

Where do we go from here?

Certainly not to yesteryear. No one with all his marbles wants to turn back the clock to other worlds and times, even if we could. The "Old Army" is gone forever, except in old soldiers' dreams.

But it's never too late to take a gimlet-eyed look at past mistakes, apply lessons learned to the present, and restore long-discarded values and principles that could make the future Army great.

The following exposition tries to do just that.