



Combat Leadership Is More Than a Class

By R. R. Keene

Marines have a term for it: leadership.

In business, where success is measured by profit, those making six-figure salaries often tend to equate leadership with management.

Other disciples of the dollar, not so high on the salary scale but aspiring to work their way up, look for leadership formulas—books they can pull from the shelf, guidance lists they can put under glass and slogans they can hang on walls.

The Marines will tell you that leadership has nothing to do with the dollar. Nor is it something issued with 782 gear. In the Corps, leadership comes from that hinterland of combat where life is a five-paragraph order and noncommissioned officers—corporals just out of high school and sergeants who barely rate a hash mark—daily make life or death decisions. NCOs such as Sergeant Walter K. Singleton.

In October 2000, the Marine Corps University Foundation (MCUF) sponsored the first of a continuing leadership lecture series for students at the Marine Corps University, Quantico, Va. Had he not been killed in action 33 years earlier, Sgt Singleton could have been the first guest speaker.

As it was, the first guest speakers were two former Sergeants Major of the Marine Corps: retired SgtMaj David W. Sommers, 11th Sergeant Major of the Corps; and his successor, retired SgtMaj Harold "Gene" Overstreet. Both, like Sgt Singleton, are veterans of the Vietnam War, and both know that but for the fortunes of war Sgt Singleton and either one of them could have easily traded places.

Fate, however, follows only one path, and while Sgt Singleton's led him to a plot in Memory Hill Gardens Cemetery, Memphis, Tenn., his place in history is marked forever, as is his example of combat leadership.

Retired Major General Donald R. Gardner, chief executive officer of MCUF, addressed the assembly of more than 100 Marines and members of the Singleton family. He recalled growing up in Memphis: "Sergeant Singleton grew up near Naval Air Station, Memphis, and so did I. We went to the same high school. One of his two brothers was a Marine. His father, George, was our Sunday School

teacher, who had fought at the Battle of the Bulge and was a decorated former prisoner of war."

MajGen Gardner continued, "We served in Vietnam at the same time. I was with 3d Reconnaissance Battalion. Sergeant Singleton was serving as a supply sergeant with Company A, 1st Battalion, Ninth Marine Regiment."

The year was 1967, and it was near Gio Linh in northern Quang Tri province along Vietnam's Demilitarized Zone that

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—SgtMaj David W. Sommers
USMC (Ret)

Singleton, at age 22, made a statement on leadership through his actions. He was on his fourth month in country when "Alpha" Co's lead platoon was pelted with a heavy and deadly shower of lead from communist gunners. Fire from a village cut down more Marines than corpsmen and others could drag to safety.

By rights, Sgt Singleton along with



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Mrs. Lucy Kirk Singleton, Sgt Singleton's mother, was one of many on hand at the Marine Corps University's Research Center, Quantico, Va., for the inaugural Singleton Distinguished Lecture, sponsored by MCUF.

the reserve platoon shouldn't have even been involved, but he heard a call for help in evacuating the wounded. Sgt Earle D. Johnson, who was in the midst of the fighting, told fellow Marines in 1968 that he recalled seeing Singleton. "He ran from the rear of the company to the front of the lead platoon," Johnson said.

Through small-arms, automatic weapons, and rocket and mortar fire, Singleton waded back and forth carrying wounded leathernecks to safety. He could have stopped at any time, and no one would have blamed him. But Singleton had also spotted the source of the enemy fire coming from a hedgerow.

"He picked up a machine gun," said Johnson, "and charged forward, firing as he ran. He forced his way through the hedgerow and jumped right in the middle of the North Vietnamese Army squad, killing at least eight of them before he was hit."

His Medal of Honor citation states the rest: "Although mortally wounded, his fearless attack ... drove the remainder [of NVA] from the hedgerow. Sgt Singleton's bold actions completely disorganized the enemy defense and saved the lives of many of his comrades."

MajGen Gardner finished the account of Sgt Singleton's valor, stating that, as a captain, Gardner had the honor of escorting the Singleton family from Tennessee to Marine Barracks, Washington, D.C., where on Sept. 4, 1968, then-Secretary of the Navy Paul R. Ignatius presented them with Sgt Singleton's Medal of Honor.

Thus, MCUF's Singleton Distinguished Lecture Series was established last year. It honors not only Sgt Singleton's memory but his service to his country as an inspiration to Marines everywhere. The purpose of the annual Singleton lectures is to broaden the leadership perspective of all who attend the Marine Corps University, particularly those attending the Staff Noncommissioned Officer Academy. Distinguished combat leaders are featured guests of the series.

"If you are not competent as a leader, you need to do something about it now," said retired SgtMaj Sommers to NCOs and staff NCOs assembled for the one-hour-and-20-minute lecture. "Five seconds isn't much time but, in the role of a

Marine leader, that may be all the time you have to make decisions that mean life or death in a firefight. If you lose a Marine due to your negligence, it can never be forgiven. The time to prepare yourself is now."

Retired SgtMaj Overstreet jumped in, saying that Marines of Singleton's regiment had no clue as to where they were headed when they moved out of Camp Hansen, Okinawa, and sailed south to Vietnam in 1965. The time to prepare was over.

"What is the possibility of you being in a firefight today, tomorrow or next year?" asked Overstreet. "It's good. This is serious business, and you have to take it serious. This is what we do for a living. You have to be well-trained if you want to stick around this gun club."

Having been drill instructors, both men said boot camp is only a start.

"We have this idea that a Marine graduates from boot camp and magically knows everything," said Sommers. "The recruit depots train basic Marines and do a pretty good job. But it is also your responsibility to teach them and train them, because if you don't, they are not going to get any better. It is important that you know your people and take pride in their training."

Sommers added, "It comes down to asking yourself, do you have control of your unit? Do you know what you're doing? It is the essence of leadership. Take care of your Marines and accomplish the mission. That's why we don't believe in luck. We believe if you have the foundation and the tools to be a good enlisted leader and you are competent, you take charge of your own destiny. You don't need luck if you are a competent leader, only if you're a bad one."

Overstreet went further: "I once read that a leader is a person who knows where they are going and is able to convince other people to go with them. In the Marine Corps, we do that by leading from the front. You look back at our history and all the wonderful, grand and glorious things that our Corps has done. We know leadership. We have been leaders for the past 225 years. We have accomplished things that other people couldn't do."

Sommers brought it home: "There's an important part of being a Marine that I think we fail to examine. Very simply, it is the spirit of being a Marine."

According to Sommers, it is what sets the Corps apart from other organizations, makes it unique and establishes it as a prime fighting force.

"The spirit of being a Marine makes the Corps what it is. There are those who



This photo, taken five days before Sgt Singleton (inset) won the Medal of Honor, shows members of 1/9 advancing through heavy elephant grass near Gio Linh just south of the DMZ at the start of Operation Prairie III. (USMC photo)

try to identify what it is, and those who come from other services to find out what the Corps is doing to train their Marines, and what they can use to change their training," Sommers said. "What they are looking for is not in a manual, not in a video; it's not on the parade field. What they are looking for comes from inside."

Sommers and Overstreet pounded home a point that has been driven into

"What is the possibility of you being in a firefight today, tomorrow or next year?"

—SgtMaj Harold Overstreet
USMC (Ret)

generations of Marines over the last century and will be driven home relentlessly in the new millennium. The spirit of being a Marine means keeping faith with family, Corps, country and God.

"When you talk about combat, there are a couple of things that you need to have at rest with yourself," said Sommers. "One, that your family is well taken care of at home and you have everything in order. Number one for me was that I was right with my God. That made me a better combat Marine, because once I knew

that in my heart, I didn't care about much else. They weren't going to hurt me. I believe that to this day."

Both Marines know that leadership is far more than sharp creases in trousers, more than singing cadence on the run, or flawless execution of the sword manual. "Leadership is by example," said both men, but even more, it is selfless devotion to duty.

Leadership is what made Sgt Singleton step up when others needed help. It is what caused him to return again and again to evacuate his fellow Marines, and it is what made him take up a machine gun and attack through the hedgerow.

The spirit of being a Marine means possessing selfless devotion to duty and leadership—things that Sgt Singleton dramatically demonstrated in Vietnam on March 24, 1967, and likely would have eloquently spoken of had he been able to lecture Marines at the inaugural Singleton Distinguished Lecture Series.

Editor's note: To learn how you may support the Marine Corps University through the University Foundation, visit the foundation's Web site at www.mcu.org, or write the foundation at P.O. Box 122, Quantico, VA 22134-0122.