

Character and the Special Forces Soldier

Bennet Sacolick

On a recent Friday I had the opportunity to address some of the finest Soldiers in the United States Army. These young men were graduating from the Special Forces Qualification Course – not an easy feat. Having spent 27 years in the special operations arena, I understood their excitement and how proud they felt during the ceremony; I had sat in a similar chair myself. However, it was important to me that their families understand exactly what their loved ones signed on for. And, in further thinking, it's also important to me that the citizens of this country know the dedication and professionalism that is embodied in the men of Special Forces. It is to that end, that I share my graduation remarks with you.

Intuitively, I think we all know how hard our graduates work for the privilege of wearing a Green Beret. But did you know that some of these young men have been in training for more than two, maybe three years? This doesn't count the months they spent just physically preparing themselves before the course began or the countless hours spent with rucksacks on their back in total solitude, usually very early in the morning or very late at night but almost always on their own time because they had other obligations that filled their day. Appreciate the fact that 75 percent of the Soldiers, mostly airborne Soldiers and many with combat experience who began the course, are no longer here today. This is the Army's most physically demanding course. Scholastically, each Soldier must master more than 1,000 critical tasks, specific to his assigned specialty and hundreds of advanced war-fighting tasks, plus demonstrate a proficiency in a foreign language before they graduate. There is simply not a more demanding school in the entire U.S. Army.

There are also several more intangible qualities that the Special Warfare Center is tasked to evaluate before we can allow a Soldier to wear a Green Beret. Qualities such as maturity, commitment, judgment, courage, initiative, decisiveness, empathy, self-confidence and adaptability. These qualities can be summarized in one word: character. There are men who have mastered their occupational skills, hone their tactical skills, become absolutely fluent in a foreign language and be the most prolific warrior since Rambo but without character they will not be a member of this regiment. Character is what defines Special Forces.

Character is a fundamental demand that our operational environment places upon our force. The men who don the Green Beret will be sent to the ends of the earth and in most cases they alone will represent and make decisions on behalf of the United States of America. Our Special Forces Soldiers routinely work in small isolated detachments, alone and far removed from the support and protection or daily guidance of the U.S. Government. They will only have each other to depend upon so we must insure that every single one of them has the character and integrity to function, maneuver and operate in these very complex environments. When our young men are

thousands of miles away from their leadership, can we depend upon each and every one of them to do what is right? Can their fellow teammates count on them, without regard to the dangers involved? Of course they can and I am very, very confident that our graduates will always achieve their assigned mission. This is the expectation that our country, and all those who have gone before them, places upon our Regiment.

What makes this all so important is the critical role that Special Forces Soldiers play in the implementation of U.S. Foreign Policy. Think about the beauty of a force specifically designed to deploy and resolve conflicts before they require huge military intervention, a force that clearly excels in training, leading and motivating an indigenous population of a troubled foreign country, a force designed to prevent the next insurgency or failed state. I'm proud to say, we have such a force and they are called Green Berets! I believe that the Operational Detachment that each of our graduates here today will soon be a member of represents the only force in the world with the innovative ability to seamlessly integrate the various facets of host country domestic and foreign needs, with diplomacy and combat power into one perfectly designed element, the Operational Detachment Alpha. This is why character is so vital for our men. I'm obviously biased, but I believe we may be the only force in the world that intuitively understands the balance between diplomacy and force and possess the judgment to determine which is most applicable in any given situation. It's understanding the equilibrium between these two seemingly polar opposite notions and instinctively knowing when to apply each.

Before I go any further, I need to point out that our primary mission in Special Forces, the mission of every one of our graduates, is to defeat terrorism. So perhaps you're asking yourself, "How is character going to win the War on Terrorism?" I have just spent the last three years working at the CIA's Counter-terrorist Center and I can assure you there are hard core terrorist out there who want nothing more than to attack America. The only solution for these criminals is to persistently hunt them down and kill them with the precision and the agility that typifies all our activities. In the application of pure combat power, the skills of our Special Forces Soldiers are second to none. But herein lies the problem: eradicating terrorist alone will not win the War on Terrorism, frankly, it won't even put a small dent in it. Our real problem lies in the fact that the vast majority of the world has no idea how to deal with the extremist in their own countries.

How do we change that?

One possible solution is that we send Special Forces Soldiers to these countries that have become the breeding ground for terrorism, and we engage in Nation Building. We send Green Berets with judgment, imagination, character and intellect, armed with a demonstrated understanding of the language and culture. Special Forces Soldiers that have become experts in the economic and political environments of these countries combined with their intuitive abilities to work through, with and by our indigenous friends. We help these countries build their capacity to defeat terrorism and the insurgencies that threaten stability in their country before allowing these ills to become a threat to our homeland. This mission of fostering relationships with our partner nations is the task that the graduates sitting here today will soon be executing. This is what they trained for and this is what they are prepared to do.

Has this worked in the past?

Shortly after Operation Iraqi Freedom began we realized that our presence in Iraq would be longer than anticipated so the President asked the international community to send troops to serve in Iraq as part of a coalition. Not many countries answered the call. In August, 2006, three years after the war started, there were only 21 non-U.S. countries participating in Operation Iraqi Freedom. Of those 21, the eighth ranked nation providing personnel in Iraq was El Salvador. Now as a former member of 7th Special Forces Group, one who had multiple tours in El Salvador, I found this remarkable because their military was so small. Even more so, because a year later, at a NATO sponsored summit, the President once again asked the international community to step up to the plate, and once again, no one answered the call except El Salvador, who sent an additional company to Iraq. Now what possible reason does this tiny, poor, Central American country have to send troops 8,000 miles away to Iraq? None. They went because we asked them to go. They went because in their time of need the United States of America sent and maintained a Special Forces presence in their country for over a decade. This is a perfect example of Special Forces Soldiers executing U.S. foreign policy and successfully defeating an insurgency that could have destabilized the entire hemisphere.

To my fellow Green Berets, I'll ask you to reflect upon what you have achieved and appreciate a small portion of a great paper written by Thomas Paine 250 years ago: the harder the conflict, the more glorious the triumph. What we obtain too cheap, we esteem too lightly: it is dearness only that gives everything its value." Although he was talking about liberty, in essence we can apply those profound words to just about any life experience. What we obtain too cheap, we esteem too lightly, I'll ask you to think about this as it applies to your great accomplishments and appreciate that the long tab we all wear on our left shoulders is a lot more than a simple 3 inch piece of cloth.

De oppresso liber!

Brigadier General Bennet Sacolick is the Deputy Commanding General of the U.S. Army John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School. He has commanded Special Operations Forces at the detachment, troop, squadron and group level and held various staff assignments to include Chief of Current Operations at the Joint Special Operations Command and the Deputy Director for Defense at the CIA's Counter Terrorism Center. He has completed tours with 1st Battalion, 509th Airborne Battalion Combat Team in Vicenza, Italy; 3rd Battalion, 7th Special Forces Group (Airborne) in Panama; Military Advisor in El Salvador; and more than 12 years in 1st Special Forces Operational Detachment – Delta, culminating as both the unit and Task Force Commander during Operation Iraqi Freedom.

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