



BALANCE IN A MILITARY CAREER: LESSONS LEARNED ON LEADERSHIP AND LIFE

by John D. Sims

Introduction

As the only US student on the course, the interaction and relationships which were built with my colleagues from Canada and other nations were invaluable. One great opportunity was the ability to interact with students from the Joint Command and Staff Program (JCSP) or ‘junior course’— typically majors/lieutenant-commanders and junior lieutenant-colonels/commanders. Perhaps the most powerful venue through which to interact were the ‘fireside chats,’ where we ‘old colonels and naval captains’ passed on personal experiences to our more youthful successors. Usually, these get-togethers ended at the bar for further ‘discussions.’

When offered the opportunity to speak on any subject, I considered what I could pass on that might be of use in helping younger officers with their military service, while sustaining their personal and family life. In the days that followed my presentation, I was struck by the interest it apparently had generated from students who had not attended the chat. They were clearly interested in how they could better serve their nation during this present ‘period of persistent conflict,’ while not losing their families in the process.

What follows is a humble attempt to share lessons that have sustained me in my career and family life. I hope that these are of some use to you, the reader, as well. We cannot afford to lose you who serve from the ranks, nor can you afford to lose your family while remaining in the ranks. With a balanced approach to life, I believe we can keep both goals alive.

The Lessons

- **Take time to sharpen your axe**
- **Just be you**
- **Never walk by a soldier without an encouraging word**
- **Integrity is just a word, until tested**

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- **Command is not what you want, but what your soldiers need**
- **Make your own coffee**
- **Build your legacy through your soldiers**
- **Seek and give honest feedback**
- **Go to work early and come home early**
- **Tell me how this really ends**

Put balance into your career and life. During my years of service to the US Army, I've heard this many times. Sounds easy, but how is this really accomplished, especially in a 'period of persistent conflict?' I've learned many lessons of balance that have guided me in leadership and life. Some were hard lessons brought on by my mistakes; others were inspired by my leaders. Some lessons evolved over years; others came in a single emotional event. In every case, they became my guiding principles. What follows are a few that may be of use to you.

Take time to sharpen your axe

One day, as a young lieutenant, I was called to the major's office. As I arrived, I noticed he was staring out the window. I thought: "The major must have more important things to do than daydream. I certainly don't have time for that!" When he turned, he must have noticed my questioning look. He began to tell me the story of two lumberjacks, Bubba and Smitty, who went into the forest to chop wood. Bubba chopped as hard and fast as he could, never taking a break. However, Smitty took a ten-minute break every hour. At the end of the day, Smitty had a larger pile of wood than Bubba. "How is it that I worked without breaks, but you cut more wood?" Bubba asked. Smitty answered: "'Cause on those breaks I was sharpening my axe!" That was when I learned the lesson of taking time to reflect, think, pause, or just relax.

For me, playing the banjo helps me 'sharpen the axe.' My old banjo has travelled to every office I have occupied, and been on every deployment since I was a captain. It helps me reflect, think, and relax. If we don't sharpen the axe often, we begin to dull and will miss 'the big picture' – or something critically important. Take time to sharpen your axe and teach your soldiers to do so as well.

Just be you

I was a terrible lieutenant. It wasn't that I didn't work hard. I studied, learned my job, and cared for my men. I came to work early and stayed late. I learned and lived our army values. I did all the things that were expected of a young officer. But I spent too much time trying to be like the other lieutenants. I made bad decisions *because I tried to copy what the successful lieutenants did, not what I should do.* I wrongly

believed there was a narrow mould in which I needed to fit to succeed. As a result, it stifled my personality and creativity. Bottom line, I was afraid to be unique; to be me.

A leader's job is to bring out the best in people to improve the organization and to accomplish the mission. I was lucky to have a great battalion commander who was good at being himself. He broke the stereotypical mould I had of military commanders (too many war movies, I guess). He laughed a lot, often at himself. He broke unnecessary rules, took calculated risks, and was creative. He patted soldiers on the back every day; "...sometimes a little higher, sometimes a little lower." He was a great commander in every sense of the word, but he was *himself* first. From him, I learned that I could be *myself* while being a soldier. As I became more comfortable being me, I became a better officer. In turn, my soldiers became better because they were given licence to be themselves. The army is *people*, not *equipment*. Leaders enable people.

Never walk by a soldier without an encouraging word

I was on duty in the Pentagon on 11 September 2001 when the US was attacked. I was part of an Operations Team in the National Military Command Center (NMCC). The Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld, and Vice-Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Richard Myers, were in the NMCC with a host of senior leaders making nationally important decisions. After many hours of intense work, I needed a latrine (comfort) break. I literally ran down the hall to the latrine. As I entered, I almost ran over an air force guy who was in my way. I had no time to be polite. I had a job to do. I was important and I needed to get back to my station. As I began to abruptly push by, I stopped in my tracks as he turned around. It was General Myers! Though he must have been under enormous stress, he looked serious, but calm. My guess is that I didn't look so calm. Paraphrasing the brief conversation: "*How ya doing, major,*" he

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asked? "*Fine, Sir!*" "*Well hang in there major; we'll get through this.*" And off he went. This was the man responsible for coordinating the military response to 9/11, and he still took the time and effort to pass on a few words of encouragement. Those few words renewed my energy and courage, providing a calm that allowed me to do my job more effectively. You are that leader to every soldier with whom you come in contact. Soldiers are always watching, and it is your job *never* to walk by a soldier without a greeting or word of encouragement. Encouragement is a combat multiplier.

Integrity is just a word, until tested

As a young captain in 1992, I commanded the best battery in the battalion (no bias here!). We were good at firing artillery, and we knew it. We constantly pushed ourselves to beat the other batteries. Unfortunately, we pushed too hard and had a firing incident; specifically, we shot out of the impact area. Even worse, the trajectory took the round directly over the observation post where my battalion and brigade

commanders were observing fires, the round impacting about 700 metres behind their position. I expected to be relieved as

mand of a field artillery battalion, I was no different. I'd written my vision statement even before I was in the unit.



DND, Photo FC2008-024-002 by Sergeant Eileen Redding

The Chief of the Defence Staff, General Walter Natynczyk, serves dinner aboard HMCS Ottawa off Hawaii, 26 July 2008.

Upon meeting my command sergeant-major, Chief Sergeant Major Charles "Doc" Holliday, I enthusiastically laid out my vision for what I was going to do with My battalion. In the firm but tactful way of our NCOs, he re-directed me. "Sir, you might want to consider that your battalion just returned from 12 months in Iraq. The soldiers and families have been through a lot. You might want to find out what this battalion needs, not just what you want!" Wow, what a mental shift. You mean this is not just all about me?

I took his advice. The next week I met with the entire battalion in the theatre. I gave them a short summary of my core beliefs and values: family, hard work, and integrity. Then I gave every soldier a 3x5 card

commander in accordance with what I perceived as the army's 'zero-defect' culture. But I wasn't relieved. For the first time in my career, my integrity was tested as an investigation began and tough questions were asked of me and my men. Before then, integrity was just a word to me. Now I was finding the depths of my own honesty and that of my men. Those who were truthful were rewarded with the strength and power that comes from being honest. Those who lied were weighed down with the burden and insecurity that comes from being dishonest. In the end, it was a life-changing experience, for which I am very grateful.

I also came to appreciate the command climate created by my bosses. They put an end to any perception of 'zero-defect' in our unit. I resolved to create that same environment – where integrity and army values are supreme, and honest mistakes are indicators of hard work and risk-taking, not failure. This should be the same for you. Each time your integrity is tested and you pass, you gain strength and confidence to face more difficult situations. Integrity, when tested and passed, provides the calm at the end of the most difficult days.

Command is not what you want, but it is what your soldiers need

Many incoming commanders formulate what they want to accomplish even before the unit's colours are passed. "I want to go straight to the field. Train my men. Improve physical training, marksmanship, and other scores by 20%... etc." But is that what the unit needs? When I assumed com-

mand to write three things the unit does well, three things we can improve, and the name of the best or worst leader in their organization. That weekend, I read every card and identified trends to *sustain* and to *improve*, and I also homed in on leaders to watch (both good and poor).

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Doc Holliday was right. From their cards, I learned the unit needed to recharge from a challenging deployment and reconnect with their families. As a result, instead of heading straight to the field, we planned an organizational day and social events. We had a "bring your kids to work day," which helped reconnect families. And we did lots of demanding physical training and team sports. Once we rebuilt the soldiers and their families, then we could rebuild the battalion as a combat unit.

Eventually, we did go to the field. And I am convinced the soldiers performed better and the families were healthier because we shifted the focus from *what I wanted* to *what they needed*.

Make your own coffee

"Rank has its privileges." We've all heard that said. The logic goes: "When I become the commander, I'll have my own office and parking spot. I'll have a vehicle with my name on the windshield, and a soldier to drive me places. Soldiers will bring me a cup of coffee. Boy, won't I be important!" Wrong. These aren't the privileges of command. The privilege is the opportunity to serve soldiers in a larger capacity, and to have a greater positive impact. We have to avoid



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The Chief of the Defence Staff, General John De Chastelain, washes his own dishes while visiting Canadian Forces members in Qatar, 1990.

being seduced by the *privileges* of rank and position. One of the best ways is to *make your own coffee*. If you support the premise: “*I am here to serve soldiers*” versus “*They are here to serve me*,” that establishes the correct perspective and keeps your ego in check. An absence of ego allows you to be humble. It allows you to laugh at yourself and to show your personality. When soldiers see you in this *human* light, dealing with the same basic aspects of living as they do, it ‘removes you from the pedestal,’ whether you intend to be on one or not. When you can, load your own kit, make your own photocopies, or make a pot of coffee at the office. Doing the seemingly menial tasks reveals you as a humble servant, while still being the commander. Sure, you’re busy, but these simple acts send powerful messages. Your unassuming approach ultimately will lead to making the unit more at ease and effective. Take the opportunity to make your own coffee. And while you’re at it, pour a cup for the private on duty...

Build your legacy through your soldiers

Have you ever thought what your legacy might be? Consider that a career typically spans 20 years; some will serve more, many will serve less. What do you want

people to remember about you when you’re gone? Common responses are:

- “*He/she was a great leader and commander.*”
- “*He/she cared for their soldiers.*”
- “*I want to be just like him/her in my career.*”

Although these are great responses, those legacies are short-lived. Walk through any headquarters and look at the photos of previous commanders or generals. How many ‘old dead guys’ do we really remember for their contributions? The point is that our legacy is not in what we *did* as individuals during our service, but in how we *developed* our subordinates to replace us.

Our legacy is in developing strong subordinate leaders who can face and win battles in conflicts more complex than our own. It is in how we train our subordinates to embody our military values of duty, honour, personal courage, integrity, and respect. Our legacy rests in leading soldiers through tough missions while caring for their families. Soldiers need leaders’ interest and concern. Deciding to stay or leave the army is a personal decision, and leaders must support and encourage soldiers to make that decision without prejudice. We should show interest, and encourage soldiers to continue to serve. Ultimately, they will make their own decisions, but at least they will know we care.

There are countless ways to develop your subordinates, but try this: Be unavailable occasionally – which encourages subordinates to make decisions that are rightly your own. Let junior leaders make mistakes without fear of failure. Then ‘provide ‘top-cover’ and back them up when things do not go well.

In the end, it doesn’t matter what rank or position we attain, or if anyone even remembers our names or faces. What matters is that we left our legacy embodied in a lineage of quality, well-trained, values-based soldiers who continue to serve.

Seek and provide honest feedback

Give honest feedback. Sounds simple, right? Not! Providing and receiving honest feedback, especially about the things we don’t do well, goes a long way toward improvement.

Here’s a technique to try. It takes some guts, but it is worth the effort. At the conclusion of each job, once all the reports and evaluations are complete, write three to five open-ended questions to your subordinates to provide feedback on what you might not have done well, and how to make improvements. Avoid questions designed to pump up your ego. Instead, focus upon questions in areas that you sense didn’t go well, or where your motives may have been misunderstood. Here are a few examples:

- “*Do you think I treated soldiers and NCOs in the platoon fairly?*”

- “Do you think I leveraged soldiers’ talents on the staff effectively?”
- “Give an example of something I did that you think was wrong or unfair.”
- “How can I best improve in these areas?”

The most brutally honest comments are often the most beneficial to your development. Don’t be afraid of these responses, or try to justify your actions. Instead, be open, reflect upon their perspective, and consider what you might change or improve for the future.

Not only should you seek honest feedback from your subordinates, but you should provide honest assessments to them. Honest and considerate feedback lays the foundation for improvement. Perhaps the simplest and most effective tool is the officer evaluation report (OER) [personal evaluation report, or PER in Canadian parlance – Ed.] counselling sessions. Hopefully, none of us base our self-worth upon the glowing comments written in our OERs. I haven’t ‘walked on water’ lately, but that is the kind of strong language that is needed to advance up through a given system. Unfortunately, these comments, although nice to hear, do not improve our leadership skills. Honest feedback, however, does so.

As a battalion commander, I took full advantage of OER counseling sessions. These sessions helped to establish open communications with my subordinates, to develop goals, and to provide guidance. Prior to a counseling session, I would take one of those “From the desk of the Commander” pads of paper, and, in 15 to 20 minutes, list three things to sustain, three areas to improve, and what I saw as the officer’s potential. Being frank without being hurtful is critical, especially when addressing areas to improve and the member’s potential. Whether the officer would make a great battalion commander, or has limited potential and should leave the service, you have to be honest. To be credible, the feedback slip must also be consistent with the evaluation itself to be useful to the individual. In every case, I found these feedback sessions were fundamental to leader development.

Go to work early and come home early

My dad, Lieutenant Colonel (ret’d) Billy Gene Sims, has mentored me throughout my career and my life. He served 20 years as a field artilleryman and army aviator. He fought on Pork Chop Hill during the Korean War, and flew during two tours in Vietnam. When he commissioned me as a second lieutenant, he gave me some great advice. Dad said, “Son, go to work early and come home early.” I understood the “go to work early” part, because it reinforced the perception I held of the army – you had to work long and hard to succeed. But I did not understand the “come home early” bit. His point was that if you go in early, your kids really won’t miss you because they’ll still be in bed. Plus, you can get a lot of work done before other soldiers arrive and you

begin to change focus. “Come home early” really meant be home in time to sit down at the family table for dinner, and to help with homework, baths, and bedtime stories. Those are critical times in raising a family. Kids have a simple but vital need: to be with their mothers and fathers. No special activities or accessories are required; just being and talking with your kids and your spouse. Just being there will do more for family and *world peace* than any other activity. There will be deployments or training missions that prevent you from being home for dinner. Make those times the exception. If this lesson isn’t sufficiently clear, just ask your kids, and they will tell you.

By the way, my dad continued the rest of the story by saying: “Son, I mastered going to work early, but I never mastered coming home early.” I have considered it my job to finish what he started. You can help.

Tell me how this really ends

A well-respected US general rhetorically asked a reporter, when referring to the war in Iraq: “Tell me how this ends.” Envisioning how a situation might end helps shape the path to reach that end-state. We should ask the same question about our careers and our lives. How do you see your military service ending? What will your family relationships be in your twilight years? How do you measure your success? A lieutenant-general once told me: “The last act of the army is always one of rejection.” Regardless of how much rank you attain or how high the position of authority, the army will eventually *not* select you for something. Whether it is the next level of command, military schooling, or promotion, eventually we all get told “No.”

All of us are leaving the army some day. Unfortunately, rejection may lead to bitterness. A common complaint is: “Why wasn’t I selected and ‘so-and-so’ was? I’m better than that officer!” This is an error in perspective. Instead of feeling cheated, we should feel privileged to have served at each rank and position we attained. Military service is not a race or a competition. It is an opportunity to serve soldiers as circumstances and the institution permit.

There are *successful* leaders who sacrifice and lose their families for their career. Why is that? Perhaps we take our spouse for granted. As soldiers, the army gives us *orders*, but our spouse gets *invitations*. Did you ask your spouse for his/her continued support during your next assignment? Was his/her opinion part of your decisions? Have you thanked him/her for the contributions to your career, children, community, and country? Bought any flowers lately? It is when we take spouse or family for granted and fail to nurture our relationships that we are no longer successful. Spouses sacrifice a lot to allow us to serve. Acknowledging and appreciating their contributions helps reinforce why they make such sacrifices – namely, you.

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You define your success. It is based upon factors that you can control – primarily your attitude, thoughts, and actions. Therefore, allowing an external force you can't control to define your success – the institution, for example – will ultimately lead to disappointment and bitterness. And so, the question remains: Imagine you and your family long after you have left the military, and tell me how this *really* ends.

Conclusion

Some will argue these lessons are not new. That's probably true. But we have to check our priorities constantly to ensure they are balanced between career and family. Some may also pick up on the fact that I wrote more about command or leadership, and less about family. They may consider this as evidence of *poor balance*. But I believe all of these lessons apply to career or family. Throughout this article, replace the word *soldier* with *spouse*, *child*, *friend*, or *stranger* and you will see the lessons still ring true. At some point we

realize that we are all connected. At the end of the day this isn't about career, it's about *life*. Life isn't a race or competition. It is more a dance or a song where we all affect each other. It's often a question of priorities. Being a soldier is a *profession*, but being a father or mother, husband or wife, is *life*. We have to invest in career and family simultaneously, as neither will wait for the other to be completed. Balance cannot be just a buzzword. It must be bred into our culture through our actions. My hope is that some of these lessons may help you sustain your military service and your family through a balanced life.

Dedicated to the memory of my good friend, Doug Smith, who did more to embody balance of life than anyone I've known.

John D. Sims
Colonel
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DND Photo HH2008-0457-008 by Private Rick Ayer.

Petty Officer 2nd Class John Chisholm is greeted by his wife and family after returning home to Halifax from Operation *Enduring Freedom* aboard HMCS *Iroquois*, 23 October 2008.