



### **Letters on Leadership #18: Hope is Not a Strategy**

Modern combat is perceived to be very different from what our fathers and grandfathers experienced, and we continuously re-invent our tactics to counter the enemy's "new" tactics. However, when you break it down into its main components, combat is actually not all that different today vs. then. We still face the same types of tactics that our Vietnam Veterans faced, including booby traps and an enemy that blends in with the local populace. We also face many of the same weapons systems they used in the 1960's and 70's, such as the AK-47 assault rifle and the Rocket Propelled Grenade (RPG). True, today our weapons and equipment are significantly advanced; we can detect and kill the enemy in many different ways, and we can protect our vehicles with high tech armor. Even so, the enemy still gets a vote – and so do your adversaries on your chosen battlefield.



When America goes to war, she values each and every American life so much that she spends millions of dollars to prevent even just one from being lost. In response to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan we have invested incredible amounts of defense dollars in Mine-Resistant Ambush Protected (MRAP) vehicles, mine hunting dogs, and personal armor to avoid and defeat IEDs. However, this isn't enough. The enemy will always find a way to get some of them through, and thereby destroy American lives and vehicles. In that moment when the protective measures fail, what matters *most* is how we react! We spend an obscene amount of money on armor and protection, but with a combat patrol going out each day over a ten-month deployment, it's still only a matter of time before a team gets hit with a roadside bomb or an RPG. In these catastrophic situations, throughout all generations of armed conflict, **great leadership** is the common thread that saves lives and destroys our enemy's will to fight. Leaders don't just take protective measures to prevent or avoid adversity – they train their men and women for what they will do, not if, but *when*, adversity strikes.

What we do when adversity occurs on our chosen battlefield will define us as individuals and as a team. I served as an advisor attached to a U.S. Army Special Forces Operational Detachment-Alpha unit (an "A-Team") in Eastern Afghanistan, and we spent thousands of hours on patrol through enemy-controlled territory. Our team had been in many firefights and thus far had been fortunate to have very few of our teammates get injured. However, on one particular vehicle-mounted patrol, we were ambushed by a Taliban force hiding just 50 meters away in a graveyard. The enemy hit us at a tight turn in the road with rifle, machine gun and RPG fire.

Several RPGs were fired at my vehicle, and one of them was a direct hit on our gunner. It detonated inside the gun turret, killing the gunner and sending shrapnel into the passenger compartment of the truck, wounding 3 and severely concussing the rest of my teammates and myself. Now, our unit could have easily become derailed by the number of casualties inflicted by that one shot, and then been decimated by a Taliban force taking advantage in our moment of weakness. However, we had all trained for that moment in the weeks, months, and years leading up to it. I hold my teammates in the highest esteem for the heroic acts of bravery that I witnessed that day – however, there was not one single person who “rose to the occasion.” Rather, everyone fell back on their habits, and did what elite warfighters are trained to do: we immediately returned fire, which allowed us to maneuver on the enemy and put them on the defensive. We then collected our casualties, coordinated air strikes and eventually medically evacuated our wounded and killed teammates. In other words, we met the two standards to which leaders are held: **we accomplished the mission and we took care of our teammates**. All of this took place while individuals were engaging the enemy with their personal weapons and maneuvering our vehicles to finish the fight.



In sports, we tend to focus on our star player and training our 1st string. We may even plan for some adversity if that star player goes down, but what about when we lose 3 or 4 men / women on defense? Can we still attack?! If you are a 2nd or 3rd player on the depth chart, are you really preparing each and every day to fill the starting role? Know this: you may be called upon to do so, and if you have not prepared sufficiently, you will let your teammates down when they need you most. Another example, sadly, is the active shooters that we've seen on college and high school campuses in recent years. We no longer have the option of simply "hoping" that this doesn't happen to us – we must prepare mentally for *when* it occurs. Not necessarily how to be the hero, but how to keep our fellow students and ourselves alive. You see, hope is not a strategy, and in times of adversity human beings do not "rise to the occasion." Instead, we fall back on our habits, training, and preparation prior to that event. Make sure those habits, training and preparation are excellent, and sufficient to withstand true adversity! **"Hope for the best and prepare for the worst"** is what we say in the USMC, and as good leaders we must take that into our everyday lives as well.

Attack!

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