



Leadership is a Contact Sport

Colonel John Ripley, Navy Cross Citation:

The Navy Cross is awarded to Captain John W. Ripley, United States Marine Corps, for extraordinary heroism on 2 April 1972 while serving as the Senior Marine Advisor to the Third Vietnamese Marine Corps Infantry Battalion in the Republic of Vietnam. Upon receipt of a report that a rapidly moving, mechanized, North Vietnamese army force, estimated at reinforced divisional strength, was attacking south along Route #1, the Third Vietnamese Marine Infantry Battalion was positioned to defend a key village and the surrounding area. It became imperative that a vital river bridge be destroyed if the overall security of the northern provinces of Military Region One was to be maintained. Advancing to the bridge to personally supervise this most dangerous but vitally important assignment, Captain Ripley located a large amount of explosives which had been prepositioned there earlier, access to which was blocked by a chain-link fence. In order to reposition the approximately 500 pounds of explosives, Captain Ripley was obliged to reach up and hand-walk along the beams while his body dangled beneath the bridge. On five separate occasions, in the face of constant enemy fire, he moved to points along the bridge and, with the aid of another advisor who pushed the explosives to him, securely emplaced them. He then detonated the charges and destroyed the bridge, thereby stopping the enemy assault. By his heroic actions and extraordinary courage, Captain Ripley undoubtedly was instrumental in saving an untold number of lives. His inspiring efforts reflected great credit upon himself, the Marine Corps, and the United States Naval Service.

I met Colonel Ripley while a midshipman and member of the varsity lacrosse team at the United States Naval Academy. He was a sports enthusiast and loved lacrosse, in particular (although he may have told this to every team on campus). In any event, we became good friends, especially when I returned to the Naval Academy as a Marine Corps Officer. My best friend, also a Marine



Corps Officer, Doug Zembiec (KIA Iraq 2007) and I had the privilege of spending countless hours with Colonel Ripley, prior to his death in 2008 (it was actually Colonel Ripley who had called me to tell me that my best friend had died in 2007). Every interaction with Colonel Ripley was a lesson on leadership and to call him one of the most influential mentors of my life would not be hyperbole.

However, the one that I am reminded of constantly, is “*Leadership is a Contact Sport.*” Leadership requires us to: a) be present and b) physically interact with our teammates. “Let’s go guys,” in the history of “let’s go guys,” has never actually made anyone “go,” who wasn’t already going.

Question: During this fall season though, how often do we see a quarterback come to the sideline after a three-and- out, get on the headset with his offensive coordinator, take a sip of water and then continue to sit in that same spot until it is his turn to get back on the field?

Answer: As often as a manufacturing shift manager sits in their office for an entire eight-hour shift, while his team is “on the floor,” working. As often as a Principal or Mayor, sits in their office doing paperwork for an entire day, while their teachers and fellow government coworkers, respectively, are in their own separate rooms or offices.

Come to the sideline, talk to your coach, get a sip of water and then walk up the sideline and shake your teammates hand. Pat them on the back. Leave your cell phone in your office (the paperwork and emails will always be there), go down to the floor, shake hands, pat on the back and communicate with your corporate teammates, fellow teachers and government employee teammates. Remember Colonel Ripley: “Leadership is a contact sport.”

The Program has the privilege of working with more than one hundred and fifty athletic and corporate teams annually. These teams range in size from very small to having a world-wide footprint, they are entirely located in a one-room office to hundreds of offices around the world. There are indeed reasons and factors that make it more challenging for leadership to be a contact sport. More challenging, but not impossible.

Impossible is blowing up a steel bridge with 500 pounds of explosives while the enemy shoots at you, while you climb hand over hand, placing the explosives. Colonel Ripley blew up the bridge. We can shake our teammates’ hands. **Leadership is a Contact Sport.**

Attack!

Eric Kapitulik

Founder and CEO

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