

Leadership Makes the Difference

A Personal Talk with Danny R. McKnight, Colonel, US Army (Retired)

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On February 22, 2003, the 1st Bn, 389th Regt, 2d Bde., 98th, based in Schenectady, NY, was privileged to take part in a personal talk with a true American Patriot. Mention Colonel Danny McKnight by name in military circles, and he is readily known as a warrior-leader. For those of you less familiar with him by name, just pick up the book or view the movie entitled “Black Hawk Down”, and you’ll quickly learn that he was the Army officer who led Task Force Ranger in Mogadishu, Somalia in 1993. In a place dubbed ‘The Most Dangerous City in the World’, his participation in the subsequent battle of October 3 - 4, has been described repeatedly as the most intense combat US forces have engaged in since the Viet Nam War.

Colonel McKnight’s visit to our unit was made possible through the efforts of our Bravo Company Commander, Captain Kelly Lelito. The Colonel was a guest speaker at the 77th RSC Commander's Conference last September, in the Pocono’s, PA. As the conference was winding down, Captain Lelito had the opportunity to speak with McKnight. During the conversation, she made an off-hand comment about how she regretted that her soldiers weren’t able to hear his talk. She said she thought that they would benefit from his comments. The Colonel suggested that he could possibly come to visit our Drill Sergeant Battalion, and together, they set in motion a plan to do so.

I had never met Colonel McKnight before, and wasn't sure what to expect of him. He is not the intimidating character that one might presume. Instead, I met an unassuming man whose presence reminded me something of my father. This is a man who spoke quietly, but deliberately. There was a firm surety that emanated from his voice when he shared many personal feelings about his experiences in Somalia, his life in the military, family, friendships, and an uncompromising love of this nation

Relative to the book “Black Hawk Down”, Colonel McKnight said it was 80% - 85% accurate, and well written. For reasons unknown, he was not interviewed by the book's author. Had he been, some of the book's discrepancies would surely have been set straight. He rated the movie’s accuracy at 70% - 75%, and said it was “fabulous” in its production and commitment to telling the story. He explained that, while most of the events in the book and movie were true, some of the things portrayed happened to soldiers other than those depicted in the book and movie. This was because “A lot of composite characters were made out of real individual soldiers. Events were true, but specific people were not”, in some instances.

Colonel McKnight raised a chuckle from all of us when he pointed out that he did NOT smoke, as his character was portrayed in the movie. This fact offered some relief to his daughter, who, after watching the movie, thought that dad had kept his smoking a secret from the family! On a more somber note, Colonel McKnight said that the movie’s portrayal of Army Rangers removing the back plating from their body armor before going into combat was not true. He was careful to point out that Ranger body armor (at that point in time) and Delta Force body armor were not the same. While Delta armor DID have a back-plate, the type of body armor that the Rangers wore DID NOT have removable plating in back. The Rangers had no back protection because there was none built into the body armor. The movie’s portrayal of Ranger casualties (as the result of poor judgment) by removing their back plating was inaccurate. Colonel McKnight cited this equipment limitation as one of the “Lessons Learned” from Mogadishu. (Since that battle, Ranger body armor has been modified with back plating.)

When asked if the Mogadishu battle was as intense as that shown in the movie, Colonel McKnight said, “No, the actual intensity was about 10 times more than what was portrayed in the movie”. The producers condensed what happened over a 19-hour period into a 2-hour film. Try as I might, it is just too hard to imagine what those soldiers endured over the two days they were engaged in almost constant combat.

Colonel McKnight served honorably in the United States Army for 28 ½ years at all levels of command around the world. However, his next comments gave everyone in the room something to think about.

He said "I never had a job for 28 ½ years. Jobs are what people do during the day, and end at dinnertime. A profession is something that takes more than 8-5. A military career is a unique profession, and one of the best in the world. Don't let anyone tell you it is a job."

Though he is no longer wearing BDUs, Colonel McKnight continues to serve our Nation. Presently, he is the Homeland Security Coordinator for Brevard County, Florida. On the subject of Homeland Security, McKnight made an interesting point. He said the recently created Department of Homeland Security may be new, but as a Nation, we've been doing it for years (just not calling it that). Every military person who has served, whether overseas, or here in America, has been working toward that goal. I couldn't agree more. Our practices and procedures may be different in 2003, but the basic principles of Homeland Security remain true to the spirit of the Minutemen and Ethan Allen's 'Green Mountain Boys' that began over two centuries ago – commitment to secure and protect the freedom of this Nation.

McKnight drew a striking parallel between his experience in Somalia and the tragic loss of the Space Shuttle Columbia and her crew. In Mogadishu, his Ranger convoy already had the enemy rounded up and on the trucks, moments away from heading back to base camp, when the first of two Army helicopters were shot down. This event changed the scope of his mission drastically. With Columbia, the crew was just 16 minutes from home, entering their final glide path to Kennedy Space Center, Florida, when things (yet to be determined) went terribly wrong. In both instances, he said with pained expression, "We were this close", (as he raised his hand, thumb and index finger barely separated).

McKnight spoke repeatedly about the soldiers he learned from, and those who mentored him throughout his career. "Leadership is the most important thing in our profession. Training and technology are important, but leadership makes the difference." Colonel McKnight's decision-making process in selecting which of his units would deploy to Somalia is a perfect example of this statement. Back in '93, McKnight (a Lieutenant Colonel at the time) was a Ranger Battalion Commander. His unit was in Texas, conducting field-training exercises, when word came down that they were needed for a "real world" mission. He needed to select a Ranger Company (reinforced with one additional platoon), and have them ready to go the next morning. McKnight quickly, but methodically conducted a mental evaluation of his companies. Beginning with his Company Commanders and Lieutenants, he noted that all were excellent officers. Moving to his First Sergeants, again, he recognized that all were experienced NCO's, and fully capable. Pushing further down the company leadership chain, he considered his Platoon Sergeants. It was at this level where McKnight found the deciding factor he was looking for in his unit selection. All of the companies had exceptional Platoon Sergeants, but one company had four with Panama experience he could draw from- four Platoon Sergeants with "real world" experience. This experience set them apart from the others. McKnight knew that superior leadership at the lowest possible level could make the difference, and this was where he found it.

Many columns have been written and much speculation (sometimes referred to as Armchair Quarterbacking), has been raised over the years by all sorts of people regarding decisions that were made before, and during the U.S. involvement in Somalia. The Mogadishu action has been used as case study in many military institutions, West Point among them, where I taught Cadets on this very subject. However, none are so qualified to comment on this situation as those who were actually involved in the mission. Looking back, Colonel McKnight expressed his feelings about two specific administration decisions made prior to the Somalia deployment that he felt had significant impact upon the scope of the mission.

First, prior to deployment overseas, an order was issued that limited the task force to 450 personnel. However, the combined Ranger/Delta Force group had been training with almost 600 soldiers for the mission. Ask any soldier what Army doctrine states, and he will say you "Train as you fight". Task Force Ranger was doing just that. The men and resources necessary to conduct the assigned mission were prepping for duty. However, the decision was made to cut out 25% of the task force, and McKnight lost valuable personnel. This significantly reduced the unit strength, and effectively eliminated its tactical reserve.

Second, the task force was told that it could NOT take any Air Force AC-130 gunships on the mission. These aircrews and soldiers had excellent working relationships, and had trained with the task force.

The gunships primary missions were fire support and force protection. Their role was important to the taskforce. Regardless, the decision to eliminate the AC-130s was made. This decision unquestionably negated the task force's fire support advantage. Helicopters alone simply could not provide complete fire support and force protection to the task force, should those assets become necessary.

Together, those two decisions compromised the strength of the task force, and limited its abilities to act or react to the evolving situations in-country. Would things have been different in Somalia if the original compliment of personnel and equipment had gone on the mission? Based on the Colonels' comments, it's hard for me to think otherwise.

The Colonel also talked about Army Values, and it was clear to all that he took these to heart. Values like 'commitment', 'integrity' and 'trust' were laced throughout his conversation. These things make up a soldiers' way of life. But, beyond the men and women in uniform, their families also expect and rely upon these values to help them see things through as well. The meanings of these words were crystal clear when McKnight recounted the events surrounding the death of his friend, CW4 Cliff Wolcott, whose helicopter was shot down during the battle. "Cliff Wolcott", he said, "was trapped out there...WE were not...he was already dead, but HE was trapped...and we weren't leaving until we got him out." Though his convoy was under constant and relentless attack by Mohamed Farrah Aidid's militiamen and other clan combatants, McKnight didn't seem to look at himself, or his men as the ones trapped. Rather, he thought of Wolcott in this time of need. I found this expression of personal commitment and resolve riveting, and my admiration for him grew at that moment. What he said next was even more inspiring to me.

Colonel McKnight recalled that some time later, in the United States, he talked with Cliff Wolcott's wife, Chris. During the conversation, she expressed her thanks to him for what he and the Rangers had done to get Cliff out of the helicopter and bring his body back. They didn't leave him behind. She and her family understood the commitment these soldiers had, to bring Cliff home, and the values they lived by.

All soldiers make pacts with themselves and each another that amount to: 'You watch my back, and I'll watch yours...No one gets left behind'. We do everything we can to live up to that trust. Sometimes the words are verbalized. But, just as often, they are silent promises; unspoken bonds between soldiers; simply known to be, and depended upon. Cliff Wolcott and every soldier in Mogadishu knew that. Every soldier around me knows it, too.

Colonel McKnight's talk moved to two other men he called friends: MSG Gary Gordon and SFC Randy Shughart. Gordon and Shughart were orbiting above the battle on Sniper duty when **Chief Warrant Officer Mike Durant's** helicopter was shot down. The downed aircrew was under heavy fire, with little protection. Both of these Delta Force soldiers repeatedly asked their chain-of-command to be inserted into the crash site, as it could not immediately be reached by friendly ground forces, and would soon be overrun. The men down there that needed help now! Their initial requests for insertion were denied.

Both men knew that, if inserted, they would be on their own, against a very large enemy force until help could arrive. They also knew the personal consequences of going in, but both were sure of themselves. There was an injured aircrew on the ground that desperately needed help, and Gordon and Shughart were committed. Again, they requested permission to go in. This time, they received the go ahead.

Once on the ground, both soldiers established fighting positions, and began defending the aircrew, using all available means to them. There was an overwhelmingly large number of enemy militia that finally converged on the crash site. It was their heroic efforts that helped to save Mike Durant's life. Posthumously, Gordon and Shughart received the Nation's highest award, the Medal of Honor. Everyone in the room took in the gravity of this terrible situation, and tried to understand, at least in part, the limitless courage of both men.

After a moment, McKnight said, "I wish Gary Gordon and Randy Shughart did not receive the Medal of Honor." With that comment, I asked myself, 'What is this guy thinking? Those soldiers were heroes. Of course they deserved the medals.' Then McKnight completed his thought, and the weight of his words overwhelmed me.

“I would rather have them both here now”, he said. With this sense of finality, my personal feeling of loss and my solemn gratitude to them, for their selfless service to man and nation, was magnified beyond anything I could say or write on these pages. McKnight's comments have compelled me toward deep inner-reflection over the past few days.

When the movie, “Black Hawk Down” came out in 2002, McKnight went to see it on a Sunday. He drove to a small theatre in a town near his Georgia residence. He expected the number of moviegoers to be light that day, as he thought most people would be in church. He sat alone in the dark for two hours, and watched Mogadishu unfold before him, revisiting events of his past. When the movie was over, and people began filtering out, McKnight remained in his seat. As he explained to us, the film had moved him, and he needed a few moments to gather himself. After a time, he stood to leave. The dimly lit theatre was empty, except for two people on the other side, who he hardly noticed. As he moved down the aisle, he happened to glance over, and his eyes met those of a man standing alongside of a woman. In the dim light, their eyes locked in subtle recognition.

Slowly, the two men walked toward one another. The woman watched as they came face-to-face, looking into each others' eyes. Then, without a word, they embraced. They spoke no words. They just embraced quietly. After a few moments, they parted, and the men looked to each other a final time. Then McKnight turned, and slowly walked away as the woman stood to the side, silence surrounding them.

That man was Scott Galentine, a Task Force Ranger Sergeant who had served with McKnight in Somalia. McKnight said he looked upon the young, single man like a son. Circumstances brought them together in 1993. Shortly thereafter, they parted company. Nine years later, circumstances brought Galentine and McKnight back together once more. Ironically, both men sat quietly in the dark of that Georgia theatre, mere rows apart, unbeknownst to one another, and revisited that faraway place and time where they had endured so much together.

By this time, Galentine was married. Accompanying him to the theatre that day was his wife Casey. McKnight said he learned later that she was confused by their silent embrace, and asked Scott why they hadn't they said anything. Galentine said he didn't know exactly why. McKnight said that that moment wasn't the time to speak - they didn't need to. What I see is a soldier's bond between the two men that needed no words. What those men shared was an unspoken bond of loyalty and commitment that spanned the years they were apart from one another. These kinds of bonds, the ones soldiers make, have no time limit. They last a lifetime.

Colonel McKnight shared so much of himself - much more than I have put to paper. I respect him tremendously. The man is a leader. He is a Patriot. He personifies the statement that 'Leadership makes the difference'. When our talk was over, Colonel McKnight thanked the 1st Bn soldiers for our military service, stating that it was this kind of commitment that would help keep our nation free and strong. Throughout his talk, Colonel McKnight expressed his feelings about the value of liberty and the price that's been paid for our freedom. He said, “The American way of life...There is a cost associated with it...It's never been given...It's always been earned...We're going to ensure it.”

Thank you, Colonel McKnight. You are right. We are going to ensure it. You can count on it.

Note: Chief Warrant Officer 2 Joseph P. Yakel has served in the United States Army since April 1983, on both Active Duty and in the Army Reserve. He was stationed at SHAPE (Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe), Belgium from 1984-1986. Other duty assignments have included Fort Gordon, GA, Fort Huachuca, AZ and Fort Bliss, TX. In January 1991, he was mobilized to Fort Leonard Wood, MO for Operation Desert Shield/Desert Storm. A Drill Sergeant at the time, Yakel trained over 1,200 IRR soldiers for duty in the Gulf War. He was Appointed as a Warrant Officer 1 on November 15, 1996, and Commissioned as a Chief Warrant Officer 2 on November 15, 1998. He is currently the Assistant Operations Officer, assigned to the 1st Battalion, 389th Regiment, 2d Brigade, 98th Division (IT), in Schenectady, NY.

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