

Some Thoughts on Taking Care of Your Soldiers

by Brigadier General John C. Bahnsen (Ret.) and Captain Robert W. Cone



Have you ever met a fellow officer who did not claim to "take care of soldiers?" Of course not! "Taking care of soldiers" has become the standard byline of our professional dialogue. But what exactly does "taking care of soldiers" mean?

To many officers, it is synonymous with somehow making the Army system work for the individual soldier, or ensuring that the system meets the soldier's needs. Such a notion is fluffy at best and is probably the reason — despite all the rhetoric — we generally take care of few soldiers very well. Unfortunately, "taking care of soldiers" is a concept that is long on good intentions and short on specifics.

The purpose of this article is to provide some age-old techniques of "taking care of soldiers" that work well in peacetime and will return big dividends in war. The ideas we offer are really little more than old wine in new bottles. There is little pride of authorship here, as few of these techniques are original. Rather, they are simply an accumulation of ideas that work. Tested in both peace and war, they have passed from mentor to mentored over many years

Our profession is one of the very few that encourage the free exchange of such professional "techniques" without acknowledgment. We know that you have ideas that al-

ready work; but just maybe you will find something here that will make things better still.

On Health and Physical Well Being

Few organizations possess the resources to care for the total needs of their members. In the main, the U.S. Army does. Despite that fact, one does not have to look very far to find soldiers with rotten teeth and in poor physical shape. The resources to fix these readiness degrading problems are all available, but few soldiers — by themselves — possess the skill, knowledge, or persistence to make the bureaucracy deliver. Making the bureaucracy work for your soldiers' benefit is your job as a leader and as a commander, and that's not easy. Dealing with problems takes time — both your own and that of your soldiers — and often distracts from your immediate concerns of "getting Delta 34 up" or getting ready for the ARTEP or qualification gunnery. Moreover, some of the "little things" you encounter in dealing with the bureaucracy tend to get you in more trouble than may seem of immediate worth to you. For instance, making a bunch of dental appointments for soldiers and then not following through on seeing that the soldiers get to them does tend to generate some embarrassing statistics at higher headquarters. The point, though, is that you need to worry about the big pic-

ture. Sure, you can "micromanage" your way through a marginally successful 12-18 months of command by working problems on a day-to-day basis, but the truly big gains come from long-term payoffs from long-term investments, such as taking care of the health of your soldiers.

Dental Care

How many "snaggletooths" do you have in your unit? We bet that if you have not personally checked your soldiers' mouths, you have at least a handful of soldiers with obviously decayed, missing, or twisted teeth. You say: "How can this be? They all have their teeth checked by dentists at every prep-for-overseas-movement exercise, every birthday-month audit, and every routine exam!" While all that is probably true, the pathology of dental disease is a devious one. Those soldiers' teeth didn't get that way overnight, and although they probably don't like their teeth as they are, those soldiers sure don't want to go through the agony and aggravation of getting them fixed. Although they may be identified for dental work at these various screening procedures, they just never seem to make it over to the clinic to get the work done.

It is not just young soldiers who have bad teeth, either. Take a hard look at your first sergeant's and your platoon sergeant's teeth. These individuals can provide the most creative and exotic excuses for

avoiding dental work. Do not hesitate to make them open their mouths and show you their teeth. Keep a little card file, reminding you just who needs what. But most of all, follow up and make sure that, once the dental care is started, it is finished regardless of how inconvenient it is for your unit and how uncomfortable it is for the soldiers.

More than likely, you will not get thanked for making the soldier go to the dentist tomorrow or the next day, but they will appreciate it eventually. That is taking care of soldiers.

Medical Care

The dental care issue may seem like a minor point, but the same principles can be applied to medical care. Very fortunately, our soldiers are pretty durable and rarely get hurt or sick. When they do need treatment, it is just as serious to them as it is to a four-star general. They will be treated just as well as a general, and they need to know that.

Take the time to personally visit your troops in the hospital and make sure their friends and squad or crew members do also. It can be a frightening experience for a young soldier to find himself all alone in the hospital without contact from his family and friends. Let him know that somebody cares and that it matters that he gets good treatment and gets well quickly.

A real secret to good health care is getting to know the people who take care of your troops. As a unit leader, take the time to let your unit's physician assistant, medical platoon leader, or even doctor from the hospital know who you are. Make a personal effort to ensure that they understand your unit's training needs and that your soldiers matter to you personally. Let them know when you think they have done a good job and invite them to your unit's training events.

Building a good rapport not only tends to smooth out rough spots in communication, but provides your soldiers with a more friendly and familiar face when they need it most.



D Co., 1-67 Armor pulls together to win division championship in the 2d AD during 1984 tug-of-war competition. Pick your sports carefully, the authors suggest. "Find a sport best suited to your unit's talents and make it an all-out effort."

Physical Fitness

One key to good health is good, hard physical training. Immediately, this statement means many things to different audiences. Physical fitness has gotten a bum rap in recent years by the predominant image of seemingly bionic young officers grinding many of their senior NCOs and less fit soldiers into the dirt on 10-kilometer runs. This is a shallow perspective that really misses the point of physical training. The ultimate goal is teaching them to take care of their mind, their body, and their spirit — the entire holistic fitness program which we are now undertaking in the Army. Soldiers need to understand the basic concepts of diet, conditioning, strength development, and aerobic fitness.

Physical fitness should be a winning proposition for all and it is the leader's job to make it that way. PT events should be tailored to meet the needs of all soldiers both young and old. Stretching before and after exercise is something you owe your older soldiers. Do not jump in and out of fitness programs, but build toward attainable objectives and then celebrate their attainment. Find a way to give your weaker performers special attention, but avoid embarrassing them publicly. Good tips for this are the "Run for Your Life" award program, release point runs, and small group *farflecks*. Nothing can give your unit and its

soldiers the same emotional lift as winning at competitive athletics. Unfortunately for many units, such endeavors are a double-edged sword. Many units halfheartedly enter team competitions simply to fill a requirement. They end up forfeiting half their games and humiliate themselves in the games that they do play. As a commander, pick your sports carefully. Consult your training schedule to make sure you can finish what you start. Find a sport that is best suited to your unit's talents and make it an all-out effort. A division championship in a weird sport that can be mastered by practice, like "tug-of-war", is far better than losing records in football and basketball. Taking care of soldiers is giving them the winning edge.

Nutrition

Another way of taking care of your soldiers' health is in the dining facility. Did you ever wonder why troops swarm to the "gut truck" or "poagie wagon" each morning when it rolls into the motorpool or onto a range? More than likely, it is because your soldiers didn't get up early enough to get breakfast in the mess hall. The 70-cent breakfast is the best deal going in the Army today, and yet, if you check the headcount, you will find that very few of your soldiers take advantage of it. Where else can you go into a restaurant, cafeteria-style, and have all the toast you want, all the milk

you can drink, cereal, and fruit (two to three different kinds)? And if you *must* eat those things that are not good for you, you can eat eggs, creamed beef on toast, and all the other wonderful things we serve in our mess halls. The 70-cent breakfast is the way to take care of your soldiers, so they do not wait until the "maggot wagon" comes through the motorpool to spend their precious money on a pastry and coffee for a buck-and-a-half. That kind of food does not last long.

Great idea, you say. But just how do you get your soldiers to breakfast? It is not an easy situation to fix, but basically you need to make sure that the troops get up or come in early enough to make it to the mess hall. There will be plenty of resistance from the growing number of young soldiers who live off-post with their families, but they are the ones who can afford the "gut truck" least.

The other thing you can do is make sure the mess hall is serving what the troops want. Glad-hand the mess sergeant, eat breakfast in the mess hall yourself, and set up activities like company breakfasts to introduce non-users to the facility. Your mess sergeant will quickly identify you as the reason that his headcount has gone up and he will very likely be more responsive to

your suggestions and requests in the future.

Clothing and Supply

How important does a soldier have to be to get an issue wrist watch? How about goggles, coveralls, a desk in his room, or a new mattress or new pillow for his bed? Making sure your troops get everything the supply system has to offer is another way to show them that you care about them. The Army supply system is both complicated and hazardous for the unit commander. It is complicated because it takes constant study and effort to figure both what you are authorized and how to get it. It is hazardous because once you have figured the system out, you are ultimately accountable for all the extras that you bothered to get. Unfortunately, many commanders have reduced their risk by cutting back on troop amenities under the general philosophy of "the less you have, the less you have to worry about." But imagine a conversation between two privates from different units within the same battalion, one with all the little extras and one without, and figure out what kind of conclusions they will draw about which soldier is more important to his respective unit. Taking care of soldiers is going

the extra mile to show them you care about them and they they are important to you.

Another way to take care of your troops is to make sure they are wearing the right clothing for the weather. You will not have much

".. . Another way to take care of your troops is to make sure they are wearing the right clothing for the weather..."

trouble with the obvious things like field jackets, gloves, or wet weather gear; it is the little things that many soldiers consider to be optional. Such items as long underwear and the OD muffler apparently do not seem like a fashionable idea to inexperienced soldiers. Make them wear them whether they like it or not, and then you need to check them to make sure that they do. A related point involves the tendency of your more senior personnel to have accumulated "special" items of clothing. Such niceties as goose down parkas, insulated coveralls, "Mickey Mouse" boots, and electric socks are great cold fighters that your more experienced NCOs and officers have collected in their careers. Unfortunately, they have no business wearing them unless they have been issued to the entire unit. Leaders need to wear the identical items of clothing that their soldiers do in order to gauge the effects of the elements on their troops.

The quartermaster laundry is another great deal for your troops, but very few take advantage of it unless they are pushed. The reason is that quartermaster laundry is bad-mouthed by a lot of soldiers because the service is not timely or items get lost. Generally speaking, the problem is not with quartermaster laundry, the problem is with your supply sergeant. The supply sergeant is responsible for pick up and delivery, as well as accountability and paperwork. The fewer soldiers who use it, the easier the job is. The best way to solve that problem and improve your unit's



Members of D Co., 1-67 Armor, gather for Thanksgiving Dinner in November, 1983. Captain Cone, one of the authors, commanded the unit at the time.

service is for you as a commander to sign up for it yourself. For eight dollars a month you can put in 21 pieces of laundry a week and you get your fatigues and shirts back on hangers. Once you and your supply sergeant work out the details of getting the service up to your standards, then you can have the rest of your unit sign up in good conscience.

Get Yourself Organized

A sure-fire way to ensure that nothing every drops through the cracks and that you are ready to meet any contingency is to keep your entire unit waiting around for you all the time. Make them wait while you are in a meeting over at battalion so they can react to any problems that might develop in planning a training event. Keep a real close hold on them during the little free time that you do allow them so that you can call them in at the drop of a hat to get a jump on some unanticipated problem.

Sound ridiculous? Unfortunately, it is an unstated leadership practice for many commanders, and sadly enough — due to the loyalty and dedication to duty of our soldiers — it usually works. Granted, there are many situations in which units must be responsive to rapidly changing and extremely demanding missions; however, it is when such a leadership style becomes the standard in garrison life that serious damage is done. We submit that the real cause of such "leadership by micromanagement" ultimately is created by a commander at some level who is not organized and therefore places an extremely low value on his soldiers' time.

In the planning process, many leaders take their soldiers' time as sort of a given. They think that, although they worry about range time, bullets, diesel, and repair parts, the one quantity that is truly unlimited is their soldiers' time. In a sense, this is true. It is the one resource immediately available to the small unit commander which is limited only by the number of hours in a day. Un-

fortunately, the abuse of this resource has certain intangible and long-term costs. The fact is that you rarely waste the time of people who are very important to you or that you care about. When you waste a soldier's time, you are telling them that you do not value their time and that you do not care about them. And as a result, they tend to perform in the mediocre fashion that you would expect of someone whose time was valueless. This begins a seemingly endless cycle of allocating more time to accomplish less work. The solution to the problem is simple. Get *yourself* organized and make plans that place a premium on your soldiers' time.

Do Your Homework

You can never think of everything, but most of us can do a lot better than you would think. Work through every operation mentally from start to finish. When you are planning a training event, talk to the NCOs in your unit who ran the event the previous year; talk to your counterparts from sister units who have already been through it; talk to the evaluators and controllers. Gather every bit of data that you can about how it was done and what could make it better.

To learn from your own mistakes means that your soldiers are learning about you at the same time, and that makes you look stupid. Learn from somebody else's mistakes as much as you can beforehand; you will still make mistakes, but they will be far more subtle.

Use as few soldiers as you can in the planning and set up phases. Do not be shy about making your senior NCOs and junior officers put in equally long hours of preparation. Rehearsals, map exercises, TEWTs, and terrain walks are all good ways for you to get your leadership team in synchronization without making troops wait for you. When you are ready to execute — get on with it. Demand 100% effort from your entire unit and accept no less.

Train to Standards — Not to Fill Time

Today's soldiers are smarter than they have ever been. If they are pushed in training, they will accomplish far more than we expected in the past. Set high standards, and when the soldiers meet the standards early, do not jack them around because you did not figure that they would do that well. Either move on to more difficult tasks or let them off; do not make them repeat the same tasks over and over or they will respond by developing a norm of taking four hours to do something they can really do in two. After letting the troops off early a few times, you and your NCOs will smarten up and plan from the start to accomplish far more than you had expected.

Stick to Your Plan

It seems that a lot of commanders have good intentions and pretty much follow the planning process as described up to this point. But then when the first tank goes downrange and "bolos" with the brigade commander watching, or one of the troops you let off early gets caught by the colonel at the snack bar at three o'clock in the afternoon, their knees seem to get a little weak. Many will abort the plan, cut their losses, and micromanage their way to survival by overreacting to every intonation of their boss's voice. Others will stay the course.

The question is, "If they change their approach, who will notice?" First of all, their troops will notice, from the 1SG right down to the last private. The privates will just figure it was too good to last anyway, and the 1SG will chalk that officer down in his memory along with dozens of other commanders he has known who "had the right idea but couldn't make it work." Second, the poor commanders will know.

The point is, even the best of plans are going to have setbacks. Make your plans the right way and stick to them. If you lack the guts to do things the right way in peacetime

with only the threat of losing your "career," how can you expect soldiers to follow your plans in war, under the very real threat of losing their lives? Stick it out; it is usually after the first few glitches that the plan begins to pay off.

Recognizing Your Soldiers

So far, most of the ideas we've mentioned for taking care of soldiers have either involved making people do things that they did not really want to do, or that put you, the commander or leader, at some form of risk. Recognizing your soldiers is the one area that is pure gravy for both you and your troops. There are a lot of different ways that we can recognize our soldiers. First of all, you should get used to simply looking them in the eye, shaking their hand and saying "Thanks" and "I'm proud of you" when you think they have done a good job or put forth extra effort. That is the easiest way and often is the most effective.

Medals

When your unit successfully returns from a major training event or scores well on a major inspection, you should think about impact awards. Awards can range from battalion certificates of achievement, to the Army Achievement Medal, to the Army Commendation Medal.

Here are some things to remember, however. An impact award is exactly that. You need to give it out almost immediately after the event or you miss the point. Make an issue of recognizing those soldiers who are not highly visible, such as: mechanics, cooks, medics, and truck drivers. If a soldier is only attached to you, make a point of recommending him to his commander for an award and see that he gets it; he will beg to work with you on the next field problem.

Also, do your homework and find out what other awards the soldier has received. Many older NCOs do not have the newest medal, the AAM. It is often surprising to find

out that a number of senior NCOs also do not have ARCOMs. You are not finished giving the medal until the soldier has the certificate, the medal, and the orders.

Another "no lose" situation is the Good Conduct Medal. Despite the fact that there is an Army regulation that states that soldiers should receive this award and all others in an appropriate ceremony or in formation, very few actually do. Make an issue of tracking down which soldiers have not received the Good Conduct Medal and give these awards in your formation. Another good tip is to always get a photographer to take pictures of the award ceremonies. Some public affairs offices gladly provide this service. Having each photograph signed by the officer presenting the award and giving it to the soldier is a nice personal touch. The rewards your unit gets from a good awards program is worth far more than the cost of the ribbon and the piece of metal.

Efficiency Reports

Good leaders need to be able to write well to take care of their NCOs and junior officers. As a commander or rater, if you cannot express exactly how good the people who do your bidding are, then you might as well stick knives in their backs. Too many officers worry too much about their own efficiency reports and not enough about taking care of their "horses." If you cannot write, now is the time to learn. Writing comes easily to very few people and the only way that you get better at is by painful repetition. Worry less about using big words and more about being clear, concise, and to the point. You must be able to take care of the people who take care of you. Good writing is a key to this.

A related point involves the commander's role as a reviewer. You need to teach the NCOs and officers who work for you how to write as well. Too many units accept the norm that the average EER for an E-5 is a 119, the average EER for an E-6 is 122, and anything goes on these reports just as long as they



Major General John W. Woodmansee presents the 2AD's Distinguished Unit Award to D Co., 1-67 Armor in July, 1984..

do not get kicked back by battalion or division. That is wrong! Reviewers need to treat every report as if it were their own. The NCO may not be a future CSM, but every sentence should be complete and every "4" in its proper place.

In most cases it takes six or more painful drafts, but hopefully the writers will learn something. The good news on this subject is that the personal computer revolution has made it a lot easier to crank out high quality paperwork through the use of multiple drafts.

On the Family

A few years ago, this subject would not be discussed in this article. Either young enlisted soldiers did not have families or those who did were well under control of the highly organized distaff side. The Army of Excellence is much different today. The advent of the all-volunteer force raised the number of young soldiers with families while the rise of sexual equality has significantly weakened the responsibility of spouses to act as unpaid participants in their husbands' careers.

We do not wish to argue the broader implications of this social tendency, but simply to point out that the focus on enlisted family life is more acute than it ever has been. Also, we acknowledge wide variances in both the need for and current state of unit family assistance programs in both USAREUR and CONUS units.

The point is that you simply cannot escape it; if your soldier has problems at home, he brings them to work. You are ultimately as responsible for the welfare of the soldier's family as you are for the soldier. While at the same time, you walk the fine line between intruding into the sovereignty of family life on the one hand, and doing too little, or being uncaring on the other.

Unit Assistance

Effective family programs are voluntary. If you have done a good job of taking care of your soldiers up to this point, you will have a leg up on taking care of the family. It is a good idea to have unit parties to celebrate major accomplishments. But these parties should be targeted at the family. Do not make anybody do anything. More than likely, it will be apparent to you which wives are in the "old guard" and which are "new wave." Let the "old guard" organize as they please and just keep periodic touch with the "new wave." Do not discriminate against wives who refuse to participate in unit functions. If you have a tight unit, their families will follow *de facto*. The key point to remember is that the best thing your unit can do for its families is not to waste your soldiers' time.

Professional Assistance

Despite your best efforts, your families are going to require outside assistance to help with certain problems. The commander's role here is both as a directory of information to military and community agencies and often as an intermediary. It is important to stay in contact with these agencies throughout the period of the problem. Few soldiers like to admit difficulties with their families and

therefore, all levels of leadership must be sensitive to indications of trouble. Leaders need to know the conditions of housing in which their families live and the rough financial status of each family. Do not be afraid to seek professional advice with any problem that you do not think you can handle.

Conclusion

Now that we have laid out this long list of techniques and ideas, the question that must be answered is, why should you bother to take care of your soldiers? There are two good answers to that question. First, as we pointed out very early in this article, taking care of soldiers is a long-term investment that pays off. It pays off in peacetime, when your soldiers realize that you really do care about them, when they realize that it is just as important to you that the mission gets accomplished the "right" way as it is that the mission is accomplished at all. The payoff comes in strange ways. Sometimes it happens when your unit does far better on a gunnery or an ARTEP than you felt that they should have, or seeing them do something really well that you had not expected. At other times, it comes from offhand remarks you hear in the battalion area or just the way your soldiers respond to you. Sometimes it is more formal, like being specially asked to reenlist or promote one of your former senior NCOs, or receiving a Christmas card from a soldier who was in your unit several years ago.

Second, and most important, caring about your soldiers in peacetime shows them that you will care about them in combat. If you are willing to set the example for your soldiers by leading from the front and saying, "I care about you, and I'm not going to let you do something I won't do," then you will be successful in combat.

Caring for your soldiers is harder in peacetime than it is in war. If you learn to really care about them in peacetime, then combat will be that much easier and they will follow you anywhere.

CAPTAIN ROBERT W. CONE Armor, graduated from the USMA in 1979. He served as a platoon leader and troop executive officer in the 2-1 Cav and BMO and company commander in the 1-67 Armor of the 2d AD. A graduate of AOAC and IOAC, he is currently completing graduate school at the University of Texas in preparation for duty with the Leadership Department of the USMA.

BRIGADIER GENERAL JOHN C. "DOC" BAHNSEN retired in June 1986 after 30 years of service. He graduated from USMA in 1956 and commanded a platoon, a troop and a squadron in Vietnam. He also commanded a platoon, company, battalion and brigade in Germany or the CONUS. He holds 18 decorations for valor, including the DSC and five Silver Stars. He was the ADC of the 2d Armored Division when CPT Cone served as his aide-de-camp.