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## **MG Matthew Ridgway As the 82d Airborne Division Commander: A Case Study on the Impact of Vision and Character in Leadership**

Bryan N. Groves

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**As the 82d Airborne Division Commander:**  
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**The Institute of Land Warfare**  
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**by Bryan N. Groves**

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## Foreword

In the midst of World War II, Major General Matthew B. Ridgway oversaw the transition of the 82d from regular infantry to America's first airborne division. Groves explores the pioneering aspects of Ridgway's leadership and outlines how he navigated the tumultuous early days of airborne training and warfare. The paper also illustrates the steps Ridgway followed to prepare the 82d for its successful participation in Operation Overlord.

Groves concludes by highlighting Ridgway's legacy and drawing relevance for today's military leaders. By applying lessons learned from Ridgway's character and vision, current and aspiring military leaders will grow in their leadership ability.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Gordon R. Sullivan', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

GORDON R. SULLIVAN  
General, United States Army Retired  
President

September 2006



# **MG Matthew Ridgway As the 82d Airborne Division Commander: A Case Study on the Impact of Vision and Character in Leadership**

## **Introduction**

Vision and character are the two most important attributes military leaders can possess; the effectiveness of their units hinges on these characteristics more than on any others. A visionary leader has a unique ability to determine the specific steps necessary to implement successful strategies, to accomplish particular missions and to solve or prevent problems. Character—the moral courage to do what is right—marks great men and involves integrity, competence and dependability.<sup>1</sup> Without vision, a leader will not discern and communicate the actions essential for his unit to be successful. Without character, a unit will not trust the leader’s direction and commands. Major General Matthew B. Ridgway demonstrated both vision and character as one of the 82d Airborne Division’s first commanders. Ridgway’s consistent application of these traits as he led the division from 1942 to 1944 contributed to the unit’s preparation for and success during the Normandy Invasion, as well as to the start of the division’s proud legacy as America’s enduring parachute unit.

The 82d’s place as America’s lasting airborne division was not always secure. During the early days of parachute units, senior military leaders still considered airborne warfare an experiment. Because of their concerns regarding the wisdom of the airborne concept and the success the units would experience in combat, the permanence of airborne warfare remained in jeopardy. Thus, to ensure the future significance of airborne troops, the Army needed visionary leaders—men who could anticipate critical events, establish effective training techniques and solve problems—to head airborne units.

After serving as General Omar Bradley’s assistant division commander for the recently reactivated 82d Infantry Division, Ridgway became the division commander in June 1942 when Bradley advanced to accept higher responsibilities.<sup>2</sup> Although he had served successfully as a company and field grade officer, Ridgway hit his stride as a general officer.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, the timing of World War II, the development of airborne units and the corresponding need for commanders with vision and character coincided with Ridgway’s personality and ascent to division command.<sup>4</sup> Ridgway’s combat leadership and successful transition of the 82d from regular infantry to America’s first airborne division<sup>5</sup> solidified his place among the foremost pioneers of airborne operations. A case study of Ridgway as the 82d commander reveals the significant role vision and character play in being a successful leader.

## **Leading from the Front**

Ridgway gained his vision through frequent visits to his subordinate commands. Lieutenant Colonel Duane A. Lempke wrote about this enduring feature of Ridgway's leadership:

It was a characteristic of his leadership style to command from the front lines. He practiced it religiously and spent more time with soldiers at the front than most three-star generals.<sup>6</sup>

Being at the front enabled Ridgway to gain a real-time perspective. By being close to the action he could properly exert an influence over pressing situations as they developed, directing and aiding his subordinate commanders at crucial moments. As Ridgway noted,

No other means will provide the commander with what his personal perceptions can provide, if he is present at the critical time and place. . . . If, at this time, he is at some rear command post, he will have to rely on reports from others, and time will be lost, perhaps just those precious moments which spell the difference between success and failure.<sup>7</sup>

Although Ridgway's comments apply mainly to a unit under direct fire, he made personal visits regularly.

For Ridgway, being at the critical point at the critical time represented more than being a visionary. It denoted character and dependability and provided his unit the best possible opportunity for success. Speaking to the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College in 1966, Ridgway remarked,

It is a cardinal responsibility of a commander to foresee insofar as possible where and when crises affecting his command are likely to occur. . . . The commander belongs right at that spot. . . . [and he] should be there before the crisis erupts, if possible. . . . [That way, he] can start help of every kind to his hard-pressed subordinates.<sup>8</sup>

Further emphasizing the value of character, Ridgway in the same speech expressed his belief that it was the fundamental determinant of successful leadership and the mutual ingredient that he and his fellow commanders most appreciated during the rigors of combat.

Each knew the other would stick however great the pressure; would extend help before it was asked, if he could; and would tell the truth, seek no self-glory and everlastingly keep his word.<sup>9</sup>

Ridgway's presence at the front had another effect: it was a morale booster for the troops and one of the ways in which Ridgway bonded with his soldiers over the hardships of battle. Addressing his own philosophy on this subject, Ridgway commented in his memoirs,

I held to the old-fashioned idea that it helped the spirits of the men to see the Old Man up there, in the snow and the sleet and the mud, sharing the same cold, miserable existence they had to endure.<sup>10</sup>

Ridgway understood that a commander's timely presence gives him a thorough understanding of battlefield conditions; he can appreciate the effect of the elements on the troops, discern the status of his forces in comparison to those of the enemy and determine the guidance and resources that would most benefit his subordinate commanders. As Ridgway put it,

By hearing their voices and looking into their faces there on the battle-field, it was my purpose to get from them [the principal commanders] . . . their own sensing of what they were up against.<sup>11</sup>

Ridgway walked his talk. Colonel Mark Alexander, U.S. Army retired, a battalion commander and regimental executive officer during Ridgway's command of the 82d, commented that Ridgway "would go to the sound of the guns (at the front lines)" and that he "was always on top of things" because he "was a leader from the front so far as a division commander could be."<sup>12</sup> In addition, according to Alexander, he and the other leaders in the 82d thrived as a result of Ridgway's leadership presence.<sup>13</sup> Ridgway's character was so evident that even men from other divisions noticed. Major Dick Winters, an officer in the 101st Airborne Division during the Normandy campaign, recalled that

Ridgway was a solid man; (there was) nothing phony about him. . . . [While] talking with troops [he] had everyone's respect. [There was] never any doubt on [his] character, manhood or leadership.<sup>14</sup>

Indeed, Ridgway's "inspiring presence"<sup>15</sup> seemed to make an indelible impression on those around him.

Ridgway's visits to front-line units also allowed him to oversee the execution of training. In notes for a conference with unit commanders dated 28 December 1943, Ridgway emphasized the need for supervision of training, which he also mentioned in notes dated 7 May 1942. Ridgway insisted that supervision be "constant and effective" and that officers maintain "close constant observation of men."<sup>16</sup> He understood that such supervision held his soldiers responsible for performing to standard; if he and the other officers in the 82d enforced the standards, the men would be better prepared for combat because they had not been allowed to cut corners in training, and standards had to be enforced by leaders at all levels. Ridgway's emphasis on training and supervision paid dividends. Lieutenant General Jack Norton, U.S. Army retired, the 505th Parachute Infantry Regiment's (PIR's) operations officer during the Normandy campaign, recalls that they could "beat anybody, anytime, anywhere. The difference was that squads and platoons could execute and accomplish the mission."<sup>17</sup>

Ridgway's personal presence at the front helped him to identify and solve problems. His adroit ability to do so expeditiously manifested itself in two ways. One was through anticipation and prevention of potential problems, and the second was through identifying an unforeseen problem, determining and implementing the most feasible solution and seeing the process through to successful completion. Sometimes problems dealt with his unit's weak areas, while at other times they were related to units outside his immediate control but over which he still exerted influence.

When problems originated within the 82d, Ridgway utilized his personal presence, after-action reports and tough, well-organized training programs to correct the weaknesses he found. Personal presence in these situations involved more than simply visits to the front lines; it included his solicitation of feedback from his subordinate commanders. Because he was open to constructive criticism from those under him, his subordinate leaders had the confidence to tell him the negative aspects of operations that provided valuable insights so the 82d could learn from mistakes. One early example of the effectiveness of after-action reports followed the 82d's first airborne operations in Sicily and Italy in 1943. After the Italian campaign, Ridgway highlighted the importance of relieving the airborne troops and Troop Carrier Command "of all other commitments early enough [before an impending mission] to permit *real* rehearsal."<sup>18</sup> This lesson would improve the 82d's preparation for Normandy, but the 82d still had more lessons to learn to perfect airborne warfare.

Ridgway's subordinate commanders articulated many such lessons during a debriefing conference held on 13 August 1944 to discuss Operation Neptune, the Allied invasion of Normandy. Every commander of a battalion-sized element or larger had the opportunity "to speak freely, without restraint, regarding any aspect of the operation during its airborne phase and to offer any criticism he saw fit in the interests of improving our operational technique in future combat."<sup>19</sup> As a result of the conference, the leaders captured on paper important lessons regarding the use of artillery support, pathfinder aids, standard operating procedures (SOPs), individual equipment and the method of assembly after landing.<sup>20</sup> These lessons could then be used to adjust training for future operations.

Norton played a significant role in making one such adjustment. Then a lieutenant colonel and the division operations officer, Norton adapted the 82d's use of Pathfinder units. In a book he developed called *Pathfinder Operations*, which became a division standard operating procedure, he created a complete Pathfinder's Table of Organization and Equipment (TO&E) and established guidelines for the 82d's use of Pathfinders. For instance, a Pathfinder platoon of three aircraft would support each regiment's parachute assault, and the 82d and its supporting Pathfinders would begin using improved equipment to aid their missions.

Ridgway paid personal attention to problems in units outside the 82d, and the scope of his influence was indeed widespread. Examples include a matter concerning the 52d

Troop Carrier Wing, described in this recommendation for the Distinguished Service Cross, in which he considered equipment and employment methods for both the 82d and those units who supported his division:

To avoid recurrence of similar miscarriages [of friendly fire from land and naval forces upon troop carrier planes and gliders carrying Airborne troops to their objectives], Major General Ridgway initiated studies into and development of distinctly new operational techniques. He secured the enthusiastic cooperation of Troop Carrier Command and tested and perfected use of especially equipped Pathfinder Aircraft, the establishment of airborne corridors, altitudes, downward recognition lights and other improvements in operational techniques.<sup>21</sup>

Among the other matters with which Ridgway concerned himself were jump refusals, lack of training time, dispersed drops and the securing of air support, coordination and protection.<sup>22</sup> In the novel arena of airborne warfare, Ridgway's careful attention to each of these matters was of utmost importance, especially because no precedent was in place on which he could call. It was exactly this quality—considering all the issues that directly or indirectly affected the early development, employment, readiness and combat success of American airborne units—that so well suited Ridgway for leadership of the 82d Airborne Division in World War II. In essence, he was successful because he kept the division's focus on basic infantry skills while he resolved the bigger issues that affected his troops and their combat effectiveness; he saw the trees without losing sight of the forest.<sup>23</sup>

### **Better Training Equals a Better Army**

Ridgway's vision and continual quest for better methods were clearly demonstrated through the training regimen he implemented during his command of the 82d. Part of his motivation to pursue perfection stemmed from his recognition of the tremendous responsibility that he and the 82d faced as they tested the effectiveness of airborne warfare for the U.S. Army. When moving training sites from Fort Clairborne, Louisiana, to Fort Bragg, North Carolina, Ridgway gathered his troops and delivered a stirring speech acknowledging the unique role they would play in American military history and admonishing them to perform to their utmost capacity:

This I do know and you know it, too, that never in the history of our Army will one unit go into battle with so many eyes upon it as we will. New weapons, new organization, new technique, new tactics in the hands of the first American airborne division ever tested will turn the spotlight on us, and we can be sure that our enemies will watch us even more intently than do our comrades.<sup>24</sup>

Accepting this high level of responsibility readily, Ridgway implemented training programs that concentrated on perfecting soldiers' and units' ability to perform the fundamental tasks of an infantryman and a paratrooper.

Physical conditioning, tactical skill and weapon expertise formed the three foundational pillars of Ridgway's vision for training the division:

These three are of coordinate importance and form the foundation for all military training. For example, a unit must be able to fight all day, to reorganize after dark, move across country over unknown enemy occupied terrain to positions from which an attack can be launched or a position defended at daylight, and in the latter case, the unit must be completely concealed from ground and air. The ability to do this requires superb physical condition, great tactical skill, and if the ensuing operation is to be successful, weapon expertise with every arm.<sup>25</sup>

Ridgway summed up his overall view of training and its importance in the following words: "Training never ceases. Before, during and after combat it will be relentlessly pursued in this Division."<sup>26</sup> Training proved to be another facet of Ridgway's leadership in which his execution lived up to his ideas. Norton remembers that

all tactical exercises were two-sided, with an aggressor force, and they were realistic. The trick was that up to half of the [time allotted for] regimental combat team training was spent at the platoon, squad and team levels [rehearsing] fire and maneuver.<sup>27</sup>

Additional time was spent becoming familiar with friendly and enemy weapons and practicing night training. As for training during combat, Norton recalls conducting a 20- to 30-mile foot-march followed by a mock fight between campaigns in Holland and the Bulge.<sup>28</sup>

Major General Geoffrey Keyes, commander of the Provisional Corps of the Seventh United States Army, noticed the effectiveness of Ridgway's division training programs as early as July 1943. Following the Sicily campaign, in which the 82d Airborne Division was sent in as a rescue force, Keyes complimented Ridgway:

The rapid assembly and organization of your force of mixed units, and their more rapid advance on each objective to include the important city and locality of Trapani, reflects great credit upon you, your staff and your men.<sup>29</sup>

It is no coincidence that the 82d's performance impressed Keyes; Ridgway had developed a thorough training plan for landing. His memorandum specified goals regarding assembly on the drop zone and immediate follow-on actions. The first goal was to reorganize quickly after landing, while the other two concerned the advance to the first objective and the ability to occupy and defend an assigned critical terrain feature.<sup>30</sup> The fact that this memorandum is dated 31 August 1942, the same month in which the 82d became an airborne division, demonstrates Ridgway's vision, understanding from the beginning what tasks would be most critical to the division's success. In addition, he articulated his vision in succinct terms that helped the division concentrate on precise training goals, including details under each primary task to help accomplish missions, such as destroy the enemy in

the landing area; post security for all-around protection; establish contact with friendly troops; and reconnoiter, gaining contact with hostile forces as quickly as possible.<sup>31</sup>

Although the training essentials Ridgway outlined are related to basic infantry tasks, they indicate a visionary application to the airborne warfare concept that he was pioneering. His training emphasis also proved necessary and beneficial during the Normandy campaign. Ridgway's preparations of the 82d led to its ability to reorganize, fight effectively and accomplish its missions despite widely dispersed drops, hedgerows along the French countryside, initial difficulties with equipment and command and control, being outnumbered by German opposition more than three to one and suffering heavy casualties.<sup>32</sup>

Ridgway's vision included a program for training replacements that he implemented before experiencing any casualties, but which he knew were inevitable:

Before we had ever left England I had anticipated that our losses would be heavy, and with the approval of General Bradley, the Army Commander, I had made arrangements for replacements. Over their strong protests I had left behind in England a small, carefully selected training cadre, who would take charge of these volunteers as they came in, and fit them into regiments and separate artillery battalions bearing the numbers of the units fighting in France. My purpose was to indoctrinate each new man, not only with the proud spirit of the division as a whole, but with the spirit of each smaller unit which was then in combat.<sup>33</sup>

His anticipation of casualties alone was not especially visionary; airborne units were predicted to suffer losses and even built up over-strength units intentionally for this reason.<sup>34</sup> However, the plan he developed in response to the anticipated losses indicates his forward thinking, while his decision to leave the training cadre behind reflects his tremendous character. Although the decision was hotly contested by those who were to stay behind, Ridgway stood firm. The result was the division's increased ability to maintain an effective fighting force over the course of a long and arduous campaign in Europe.

Ridgway's plan for reinforcements also illustrates his intimate understanding of Soldiers—what makes them fight and what makes a unit successful in combat. He not only trained replacements on basic infantry skills but also prepared them for their particular unit. Ridgway realized he needed to address morale within units to raise the combat potential of the division as a whole. As green Soldiers were thrown into battle alongside veterans, assimilation was bound to be difficult. Although the new men could learn from the veterans, they had to first prove their mettle. The combat effectiveness of the division depended not only on having 16,000 bodies<sup>35</sup> but also on the trust those 16,000 Soldiers had in one another and the harmony with which they worked. Thus, Ridgway worked to develop a sense of the tradition in the volunteers. His efforts were rewarded by the maintenance of a strong fighting spirit among his Soldiers even when replacements could not keep up with the casualty rate.<sup>36</sup>

Ridgway's emphasis on morale was not confined to the replacement program in England; it was a primary concern during the first days of a recruit's service stateside. Because Ridgway considered morale such an important element of a unit's combat effectiveness, division loyalty was among his first concerns when reactivating the 82d with General Bradley. Following exceptional service in World War I, "with a record of having spent more consecutive days in the line than any other American division in that conflict,"<sup>37</sup> the 82d had been deactivated in 1918. With the reemergence of the German threat in Europe it was reactivated in February 1942.<sup>38</sup> Because "it seemed vitally important to indoctrinate each new recruit with the proud spirit of the old division—to plant in each man's mind the idea that valor endured from generation to generation,"<sup>39</sup> Ridgway and Bradley brought in an old World War I veteran who had served conspicuously with the 82d to relay his story to new recruits. This simple practice had a profound impact on the trainees; Ridgway recounted that they subsequently became endowed with "the conviction that an aggressive soldier, well trained and well armed, can fight his way out of any situation."<sup>40</sup> Ridgway valued the sacrifice and courage of the veterans of the 82d and used their experiences to instill a warrior ethos in his Soldiers.

### **Commanding with Courage**

Subordinate leaders in the 82d during Ridgway's time as commander expressed several key attributes about his character that inspired them, such as his "unbelievable disregard for danger. [At times,] aides had to tackle him to keep him safe."<sup>41</sup> Ridgway's intrepidity in battle endeared him to Soldiers and motivated his officers to similar boldness. He also had exceptionally high standards. He expected a lot from himself and from those serving under him. He "was always forward looking [and] on the offensive . . . [Therefore,] he expected you to do the jobs he gave you without having to be micromanaged."<sup>42</sup> As a result, most leaders under Ridgway shared his proactive mindset and were "inspired by his demands."<sup>43</sup>

This latter area of standards, however, marked both a strength and a weakness for Ridgway. On the one hand, Ridgway saw the potential in those he led and wanted to help them achieve greater success, such as when he volunteered to resume being an official mentor for Alexander after Alexander had been reassigned to a unit outside the 82d. On the other hand, Ridgway could be "a little bit of a hair trigger,"<sup>44</sup> as demonstrated in his interactions with subordinate leaders. Because he never lost sight of either the mission or the troops, he "didn't put up with shortcomings"<sup>45</sup> in these areas. The result was that periodically situations arose in which Ridgway relieved incompetent subordinate commanders.

Ridgway would not accept cowardice or ineptitude among his officers and sergeants because of the emphasis he placed on the combat effectiveness of the division. He believed in what Norton says is the formula for combat effectiveness: training plus trust in leaders.<sup>46</sup>

While Ridgway ensured that the 82d conducted sufficient, realistic training to prepare for combat, he also made certain that the other half of the equation was in place—that the Soldiers trusted their leaders. Thus, if a leader outwardly demonstrated fear or an inability to handle the responsibilities and pressures on him, Ridgway knew he had to be relieved. Regardless of the impact of the dismissal on the individual’s career, such behavior could not, and would not, be tolerated. There were no second chances for blatant violators. The reason: the lives of these commanders’ paratroopers were more important than one person’s career. While Ridgway normally was not anxious to fire leaders,<sup>47</sup> his views on the matter are aptly stated:

But your first consideration must be not for the welfare of the officer in question, but for the lives of the men who are under his command. . . . In time of battle, when victory hangs in the balance, it is necessary to put down any sign of weakness, indecision, lack of aggressiveness or panic, whether the man wears stars on his shoulders or chevrons on his sleeve, for one frightened soldier can infect his whole unit.<sup>48</sup>

In essence, Ridgway’s primary concerns were the morale of the division and their preparation for continued combat. On one occasion Ridgway relieved a commander because he was not at the front where his unit had been surrounded, and because he seemed indifferent and “little interested in the fact that that night we were going to bring his people out of the trap.”<sup>49</sup> Ridgway wanted to have under his command only those individuals who shared his same sense of determination, teamwork and commitment to excellence. Otherwise, his men’s lives would be in jeopardy and their effectiveness as a fighting unit would decrease due to a justifiable loss of trust in their leader. Thus, while relieving an unfit commander “deeply affects the unit concerned,” Ridgway did so when he deemed it better for the unit than leaving such a person in command, which leads to distrust, mission ineffectiveness and wasted lives.<sup>50</sup>

### **Ridgway’s Legacy**

Among the indicators of Ridgway’s success and lasting influence as a pioneer of airborne warfare was his selection to command the XVIII Airborne Corps upon its creation, his rating “by U.S. Army chiefs as the world’s number one active airborne commander,”<sup>51</sup> his impact on subordinate leaders and the continued existence of airborne units following World War II. The first two achievements speak for themselves. As for developing subordinate leaders, Ridgway made an indelible impact on the future of the airborne community through his mentorship of numerous officers, including Major General Maxwell D. Taylor, Major General James M. Gavin, Major General William M. Miley and Major General Joseph M. Swing. These men, outstanding leaders in their own right, were selected to command American airborne divisions following service under Ridgway. As an April 1945 issue of *Time* magazine put it, “Whatever tasks they do, the manner of their doing it will bear a strong stamp of Matt Ridgway . . . [because] ‘Each of them is a hunk of Ridgway.’”<sup>52</sup>

Indeed, these commanders continued the great tradition of visionary leadership that Ridgway had modeled, and they affected the airborne community long after he had moved on in his career.

Another result of Ridgway's methods is the integral role that airborne units continued to have in the U.S. Army following World War II. The success that Ridgway and the 82d experienced toward the end of the war earned them their place in the Army. The 82d

accomplished every assigned mission on or ahead of the time ordered. No ground gained was ever relinquished, and no advance ever halted except on the order of Corps or [Army].<sup>53</sup>

However, without the 82d's success during the Normandy campaign, largely as a result of Ridgway's vision, adjustments and preparatory efforts, American military leaders may have been less likely to continue the use of airborne units following the war. The concept of airborne warfare had come under attack earlier in the war after a fratricide incident reportedly cost 410 paratroopers their lives during the drop on Sicily.<sup>54</sup> "In the following weeks there was a furor over the future employment of airborne troops . . . [and a] thorough investigation."<sup>55</sup> With the future of airborne operations hanging in the balance, and the eyes of senior American military officials on them, the 82d's success in Normandy helped assure the validity of the airborne concept.

Ridgway's impact on the 82d's transition to an airborne division and his efforts in pioneering airborne as a new method of warfare were well summarized in a recommendation for the Distinguished Service Medal:

General Ridgway has focused the full power of his professional skill and pioneering mind to trail-breaking for and accomplishment of the long-range decisive potentialities inherent to large scale Airborne operations, whose value on a large scale he was the first to translate into actual battle experience. . . . The use of large forces of Airborne troops in the immediate future must rely upon the studies, experiences and lessons learned by General Ridgway, whose Division has been the first privileged to test its qualities in actual combat on a scale greater than any previous utilization of such forces. His has been the vision that launched beyond unseen horizons in quest of means to achieve his aims. His has been a constant faith in the ultimate destiny of the decisive value of Airborne operations.<sup>56</sup>

Ridgway's lasting contributions to the 82d, the airborne community and the Allied invasion of Europe are measures of his significance, and his legacy still carries on today. Studying Ridgway's leadership methods provides valuable insight for contemporary military leaders. As the 82d's commander, Ridgway demonstrated his vision and character-based leadership through implementation of novel techniques in airborne warfare, mentoring as well as learning from subordinate commanders, sharing hardships with his troops, standing by his decisions, firing incompetent subordinates and persevering to overcome obstacles.

These leadership attributes mark him as a great leader and remain invaluable as a case study for today's aspiring military leaders.

A study of Ridgway's leadership is key because his vision and character are universally applicable traits and crucial to today's military units. Despite the 62 years since the Normandy invasion, new threats to the American way of life, and the ever-evolving nature of modern warfare, current military leaders will still benefit from applying character and vision-based leadership in a manner similar to Ridgway. During Ridgway's days as commander of the 82d, he and his contemporaries, forever dubbed "the Greatest Generation" by Tom Brokaw,<sup>57</sup> attacked and defeated one of the greatest threats to freedom the world has ever known, Hitler and his Third Reich.

Today, America also faces a threat to freedom. Like Nazism and Fascism, actions undertaken by Islamic extremists have led America into a global struggle against evil. And like Ridgway and the Greatest Generation, today's military leaders are at the tip of the spear in this war. The Global War on Terrorism (GWOT), like airborne warfare during World War II, requires innovative leaders—leaders with character and vision who will successfully prepare their units for battle and take the fight to our enemies. Even more than World War II, however, the GWOT is not a sprint but a marathon. And like World War II and the Cold War that followed, these trying times often do not offer light at the end of the proverbial tunnel. This makes the need for inspiring contemporary leaders, in the mold of Ridgway, even more essential.

America's military needs men and women at all levels who will stand up and say, "I know the way; I know where to go and how to get there; follow me." America's military needs men and women whose units will recognize them as leaders of character and competence, who will develop new ways of defeating terrorists in their area of operations, and who will do so with the utmost integrity. From combat convoy operations to base defense to raids to support functions, today's Ridgways will make a difference through their embodiment of character and exercise of visionary leadership. And today's leaders, like Generals Maxwell Taylor, James Gavin, William Miley and Joseph Swing before them, can become today's Ridgways by studying and applying timeless leadership lessons from his days of pioneering airborne warfare during World War II.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> *The American Heritage College Dictionary, 3d Edition* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1993), p. 235.
- <sup>2</sup> Biographical Sketch of General Matthew Bunker Ridgway, Special Collections Section, United States Military Academy Library, West Point, N.Y. (hereafter referred to as “Biographical Sketch of Ridgway”).
- <sup>3</sup> Interview with Major Kelly Jordan, Department of History, U.S. Military Academy, 8 May 1998.
- <sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>5</sup> Biographical Sketch of Ridgway, p. 2.
- <sup>6</sup> Lieutenant Colonel (P) Duane A. Lempke, “Ridgway’s Leadership Legacy,” *Military Review* (Fort Leavenworth, Kans.: U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, 1966), p. 73.
- <sup>7</sup> General Matthew B. Ridgway, USA Ret., “Leadership,” *Military Review* (Fort Leavenworth, Kans.: U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, 1966), p. 47.
- <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.
- <sup>10</sup> General Matthew B. Ridgway, USA Ret., *Soldier: The Memoirs of Matthew B. Ridgway* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1956), p. 204.
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 119.
- <sup>12</sup> Interview with Colonel Mark Alexander, USA Ret., battalion commander and regimental executive officer in the 82d Airborne Division during World War II, 20 November 2003.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>14</sup> Interview with Major Dick Winters, an officer in the 101st Airborne Division during the Normandy campaign, 25 April 1998.
- <sup>15</sup> Interview with Lieutenant General Jack Norton, USA Ret., a company/battalion commander, battalion executive officer and regimental and division operations officer in the 82d Airborne Division during World War II, 11 November 2003.
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- <sup>21</sup> Ridgway Papers Memorandum recommending Major General Matthew B. Ridgway be awarded the Distinguished Service Medal, Folder: 201 File, Box 1.

- <sup>22</sup> Ridgway Papers.
- <sup>23</sup> Jordan interview.
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- <sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*
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- <sup>35</sup> Ridgway, *Soldier*, p. 16.
- <sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.
- <sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51.
- <sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 51–52.
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- <sup>41</sup> Norton interview.
- <sup>42</sup> Alexander interview.
- <sup>43</sup> Norton interview.
- <sup>44</sup> Alexander interview.
- <sup>45</sup> Norton interview.
- <sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

- <sup>47</sup> Alexander interview.
- <sup>48</sup> Ridgway, *Soldier*, p. 121.
- <sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 120.
- <sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 121.
- <sup>51</sup> “World Battlefronts.” *Time*, 65 (1945), p. 27.
- <sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.
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- <sup>55</sup> Carlo D’Este, *Bitter Victory: The Battle for Sicily, 1943* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1988), p. 309.
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**MG Matthew Ridgway**  
**As the 82d Airborne Division Commander:**  
**A Case Study on the Impact of**  
**Vision and Character in Leadership**

**by**

**Bryan N. Groves**

**The Institute of Land Warfare**  
**ASSOCIATION OF THE UNITED STATES ARMY**

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### **LAND WARFARE PAPER NO. 59, October 2006**

**MG Matthew Ridgway As the 82d Airborne Division Commander:  
A Case Study on the Impact of Vision and Character in Leadership**

**by Bryan N. Groves**

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This paper represents the opinions of the author and should not be taken to represent the views of the Department of the Army, the Department of Defense, the United States government, the Institute of Land Warfare, or the Association of the United States Army or its members.

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## Foreword

In the midst of World War II, Major General Matthew B. Ridgway oversaw the transition of the 82d from regular infantry to America's first airborne division. Groves explores the pioneering aspects of Ridgway's leadership and outlines how he navigated the tumultuous early days of airborne training and warfare. The paper also illustrates the steps Ridgway followed to prepare the 82d for its successful participation in Operation Overlord.

Groves concludes by highlighting Ridgway's legacy and drawing relevance for today's military leaders. By applying lessons learned from Ridgway's character and vision, current and aspiring military leaders will grow in their leadership ability.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Gordon R. Sullivan', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

GORDON R. SULLIVAN  
General, United States Army Retired  
President

September 2006



# **MG Matthew Ridgway**

## **As the 82d Airborne Division Commander:**

### **A Case Study on the Impact of**

### **Vision and Character in Leadership**

#### **Introduction**

Vision and character are the two most important attributes military leaders can possess; the effectiveness of their units hinges on these characteristics more than on any others. A visionary leader has a unique ability to determine the specific steps necessary to implement successful strategies, to accomplish particular missions and to solve or prevent problems. Character—the moral courage to do what is right—marks great men and involves integrity, competence and dependability.<sup>1</sup> Without vision, a leader will not discern and communicate the actions essential for his unit to be successful. Without character, a unit will not trust the leader’s direction and commands. Major General Matthew B. Ridgway demonstrated both vision and character as one of the 82d Airborne Division’s first commanders. Ridgway’s consistent application of these traits as he led the division from 1942 to 1944 contributed to the unit’s preparation for and success during the Normandy Invasion, as well as to the start of the division’s proud legacy as America’s enduring parachute unit.

The 82d’s place as America’s lasting airborne division was not always secure. During the early days of parachute units, senior military leaders still considered airborne warfare an experiment. Because of their concerns regarding the wisdom of the airborne concept and the success the units would experience in combat, the permanence of airborne warfare remained in jeopardy. Thus, to ensure the future significance of airborne troops, the Army needed visionary leaders—men who could anticipate critical events, establish effective training techniques and solve problems—to head airborne units.

After serving as General Omar Bradley’s assistant division commander for the recently reactivated 82d Infantry Division, Ridgway became the division commander in June 1942 when Bradley advanced to accept higher responsibilities.<sup>2</sup> Although he had served successfully as a company and field grade officer, Ridgway hit his stride as a general officer.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, the timing of World War II, the development of airborne units and the corresponding need for commanders with vision and character coincided with Ridgway’s personality and ascent to division command.<sup>4</sup> Ridgway’s combat leadership and successful transition of the 82d from regular infantry to America’s first airborne division<sup>5</sup> solidified his place among the foremost pioneers of airborne operations. A case study of Ridgway as the 82d commander reveals the significant role vision and character play in being a successful leader.

## **Leading from the Front**

Ridgway gained his vision through frequent visits to his subordinate commands. Lieutenant Colonel Duane A. Lempke wrote about this enduring feature of Ridgway's leadership:

It was a characteristic of his leadership style to command from the front lines. He practiced it religiously and spent more time with soldiers at the front than most three-star generals.<sup>6</sup>

Being at the front enabled Ridgway to gain a real-time perspective. By being close to the action he could properly exert an influence over pressing situations as they developed, directing and aiding his subordinate commanders at crucial moments. As Ridgway noted,

No other means will provide the commander with what his personal perceptions can provide, if he is present at the critical time and place. . . . If, at this time, he is at some rear command post, he will have to rely on reports from others, and time will be lost, perhaps just those precious moments which spell the difference between success and failure.<sup>7</sup>

Although Ridgway's comments apply mainly to a unit under direct fire, he made personal visits regularly.

For Ridgway, being at the critical point at the critical time represented more than being a visionary. It denoted character and dependability and provided his unit the best possible opportunity for success. Speaking to the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College in 1966, Ridgway remarked,

It is a cardinal responsibility of a commander to foresee insofar as possible where and when crises affecting his command are likely to occur. . . . The commander belongs right at that spot. . . . [and he] should be there before the crisis erupts, if possible. . . . [That way, he] can start help of every kind to his hard-pressed subordinates.<sup>8</sup>

Further emphasizing the value of character, Ridgway in the same speech expressed his belief that it was the fundamental determinant of successful leadership and the mutual ingredient that he and his fellow commanders most appreciated during the rigors of combat.

Each knew the other would stick however great the pressure; would extend help before it was asked, if he could; and would tell the truth, seek no self-glory and everlastingly keep his word.<sup>9</sup>

Ridgway's presence at the front had another effect: it was a morale booster for the troops and one of the ways in which Ridgway bonded with his soldiers over the hardships of battle. Addressing his own philosophy on this subject, Ridgway commented in his memoirs,

I held to the old-fashioned idea that it helped the spirits of the men to see the Old Man up there, in the snow and the sleet and the mud, sharing the same cold, miserable existence they had to endure.<sup>10</sup>

Ridgway understood that a commander's timely presence gives him a thorough understanding of battlefield conditions; he can appreciate the effect of the elements on the troops, discern the status of his forces in comparison to those of the enemy and determine the guidance and resources that would most benefit his subordinate commanders. As Ridgway put it,

By hearing their voices and looking into their faces there on the battle-field, it was my purpose to get from them [the principal commanders] . . . their own sensing of what they were up against.<sup>11</sup>

Ridgway walked his talk. Colonel Mark Alexander, U.S. Army retired, a battalion commander and regimental executive officer during Ridgway's command of the 82d, commented that Ridgway "would go to the sound of the guns (at the front lines)" and that he "was always on top of things" because he "was a leader from the front so far as a division commander could be."<sup>12</sup> In addition, according to Alexander, he and the other leaders in the 82d thrived as a result of Ridgway's leadership presence.<sup>13</sup> Ridgway's character was so evident that even men from other divisions noticed. Major Dick Winters, an officer in the 101st Airborne Division during the Normandy campaign, recalled that

Ridgway was a solid man; (there was) nothing phony about him. . . . [While] talking with troops [he] had everyone's respect. [There was] never any doubt on [his] character, manhood or leadership.<sup>14</sup>

Indeed, Ridgway's "inspiring presence"<sup>15</sup> seemed to make an indelible impression on those around him.

Ridgway's visits to front-line units also allowed him to oversee the execution of training. In notes for a conference with unit commanders dated 28 December 1943, Ridgway emphasized the need for supervision of training, which he also mentioned in notes dated 7 May 1942. Ridgway insisted that supervision be "constant and effective" and that officers maintain "close constant observation of men."<sup>16</sup> He understood that such supervision held his soldiers responsible for performing to standard; if he and the other officers in the 82d enforced the standards, the men would be better prepared for combat because they had not been allowed to cut corners in training, and standards had to be enforced by leaders at all levels. Ridgway's emphasis on training and supervision paid dividends. Lieutenant General Jack Norton, U.S. Army retired, the 505th Parachute Infantry Regiment's (PIR's) operations officer during the Normandy campaign, recalls that they could "beat anybody, anytime, anywhere. The difference was that squads and platoons could execute and accomplish the mission."<sup>17</sup>

Ridgway's personal presence at the front helped him to identify and solve problems. His adroit ability to do so expeditiously manifested itself in two ways. One was through anticipation and prevention of potential problems, and the second was through identifying an unforeseen problem, determining and implementing the most feasible solution and seeing the process through to successful completion. Sometimes problems dealt with his unit's weak areas, while at other times they were related to units outside his immediate control but over which he still exerted influence.

When problems originated within the 82d, Ridgway utilized his personal presence, after-action reports and tough, well-organized training programs to correct the weaknesses he found. Personal presence in these situations involved more than simply visits to the front lines; it included his solicitation of feedback from his subordinate commanders. Because he was open to constructive criticism from those under him, his subordinate leaders had the confidence to tell him the negative aspects of operations that provided valuable insights so the 82d could learn from mistakes. One early example of the effectiveness of after-action reports followed the 82d's first airborne operations in Sicily and Italy in 1943. After the Italian campaign, Ridgway highlighted the importance of relieving the airborne troops and Troop Carrier Command "of all other commitments early enough [before an impending mission] to permit *real* rehearsal."<sup>18</sup> This lesson would improve the 82d's preparation for Normandy, but the 82d still had more lessons to learn to perfect airborne warfare.

Ridgway's subordinate commanders articulated many such lessons during a debriefing conference held on 13 August 1944 to discuss Operation Neptune, the Allied invasion of Normandy. Every commander of a battalion-sized element or larger had the opportunity "to speak freely, without restraint, regarding any aspect of the operation during its airborne phase and to offer any criticism he saw fit in the interests of improving our operational technique in future combat."<sup>19</sup> As a result of the conference, the leaders captured on paper important lessons regarding the use of artillery support, pathfinder aids, standard operating procedures (SOPs), individual equipment and the method of assembly after landing.<sup>20</sup> These lessons could then be used to adjust training for future operations.

Norton played a significant role in making one such adjustment. Then a lieutenant colonel and the division operations officer, Norton adapted the 82d's use of Pathfinder units. In a book he developed called *Pathfinder Operations*, which became a division standard operating procedure, he created a complete Pathfinder's Table of Organization and Equipment (TO&E) and established guidelines for the 82d's use of Pathfinders. For instance, a Pathfinder platoon of three aircraft would support each regiment's parachute assault, and the 82d and its supporting Pathfinders would begin using improved equipment to aid their missions.

Ridgway paid personal attention to problems in units outside the 82d, and the scope of his influence was indeed widespread. Examples include a matter concerning the 52d

Troop Carrier Wing, described in this recommendation for the Distinguished Service Cross, in which he considered equipment and employment methods for both the 82d and those units who supported his division:

To avoid recurrence of similar miscarriages [of friendly fire from land and naval forces upon troop carrier planes and gliders carrying Airborne troops to their objectives], Major General Ridgway initiated studies into and development of distinctly new operational techniques. He secured the enthusiastic cooperation of Troop Carrier Command and tested and perfected use of especially equipped Pathfinder Aircraft, the establishment of airborne corridors, altitudes, downward recognition lights and other improvements in operational techniques.<sup>21</sup>

Among the other matters with which Ridgway concerned himself were jump refusals, lack of training time, dispersed drops and the securing of air support, coordination and protection.<sup>22</sup> In the novel arena of airborne warfare, Ridgway's careful attention to each of these matters was of utmost importance, especially because no precedent was in place on which he could call. It was exactly this quality—considering all the issues that directly or indirectly affected the early development, employment, readiness and combat success of American airborne units—that so well suited Ridgway for leadership of the 82d Airborne Division in World War II. In essence, he was successful because he kept the division's focus on basic infantry skills while he resolved the bigger issues that affected his troops and their combat effectiveness; he saw the trees without losing sight of the forest.<sup>23</sup>

### **Better Training Equals a Better Army**

Ridgway's vision and continual quest for better methods were clearly demonstrated through the training regimen he implemented during his command of the 82d. Part of his motivation to pursue perfection stemmed from his recognition of the tremendous responsibility that he and the 82d faced as they tested the effectiveness of airborne warfare for the U.S. Army. When moving training sites from Fort Clairborne, Louisiana, to Fort Bragg, North Carolina, Ridgway gathered his troops and delivered a stirring speech acknowledging the unique role they would play in American military history and admonishing them to perform to their utmost capacity:

This I do know and you know it, too, that never in the history of our Army will one unit go into battle with so many eyes upon it as we will. New weapons, new organization, new technique, new tactics in the hands of the first American airborne division ever tested will turn the spotlight on us, and we can be sure that our enemies will watch us even more intently than do our comrades.<sup>24</sup>

Accepting this high level of responsibility readily, Ridgway implemented training programs that concentrated on perfecting soldiers' and units' ability to perform the fundamental tasks of an infantryman and a paratrooper.

Physical conditioning, tactical skill and weapon expertise formed the three foundational pillars of Ridgway's vision for training the division:

These three are of coordinate importance and form the foundation for all military training. For example, a unit must be able to fight all day, to reorganize after dark, move across country over unknown enemy occupied terrain to positions from which an attack can be launched or a position defended at daylight, and in the latter case, the unit must be completely concealed from ground and air. The ability to do this requires superb physical condition, great tactical skill, and if the ensuing operation is to be successful, weapon expertise with every arm.<sup>25</sup>

Ridgway summed up his overall view of training and its importance in the following words: "Training never ceases. Before, during and after combat it will be relentlessly pursued in this Division."<sup>26</sup> Training proved to be another facet of Ridgway's leadership in which his execution lived up to his ideas. Norton remembers that

all tactical exercises were two-sided, with an aggressor force, and they were realistic. The trick was that up to half of the [time allotted for] regimental combat team training was spent at the platoon, squad and team levels [rehearsing] fire and maneuver.<sup>27</sup>

Additional time was spent becoming familiar with friendly and enemy weapons and practicing night training. As for training during combat, Norton recalls conducting a 20- to 30-mile foot-march followed by a mock fight between campaigns in Holland and the Bulge.<sup>28</sup>

Major General Geoffrey Keyes, commander of the Provisional Corps of the Seventh United States Army, noticed the effectiveness of Ridgway's division training programs as early as July 1943. Following the Sicily campaign, in which the 82d Airborne Division was sent in as a rescue force, Keyes complimented Ridgway:

The rapid assembly and organization of your force of mixed units, and their more rapid advance on each objective to include the important city and locality of Trapani, reflects great credit upon you, your staff and your men.<sup>29</sup>

It is no coincidence that the 82d's performance impressed Keyes; Ridgway had developed a thorough training plan for landing. His memorandum specified goals regarding assembly on the drop zone and immediate follow-on actions. The first goal was to reorganize quickly after landing, while the other two concerned the advance to the first objective and the ability to occupy and defend an assigned critical terrain feature.<sup>30</sup> The fact that this memorandum is dated 31 August 1942, the same month in which the 82d became an airborne division, demonstrates Ridgway's vision, understanding from the beginning what tasks would be most critical to the division's success. In addition, he articulated his vision in succinct terms that helped the division concentrate on precise training goals, including details under each primary task to help accomplish missions, such as destroy the enemy in

the landing area; post security for all-around protection; establish contact with friendly troops; and reconnoiter, gaining contact with hostile forces as quickly as possible.<sup>31</sup>

Although the training essentials Ridgway outlined are related to basic infantry tasks, they indicate a visionary application to the airborne warfare concept that he was pioneering. His training emphasis also proved necessary and beneficial during the Normandy campaign. Ridgway's preparations of the 82d led to its ability to reorganize, fight effectively and accomplish its missions despite widely dispersed drops, hedgerows along the French countryside, initial difficulties with equipment and command and control, being outnumbered by German opposition more than three to one and suffering heavy casualties.<sup>32</sup>

Ridgway's vision included a program for training replacements that he implemented before experiencing any casualties, but which he knew were inevitable:

Before we had ever left England I had anticipated that our losses would be heavy, and with the approval of General Bradley, the Army Commander, I had made arrangements for replacements. Over their strong protests I had left behind in England a small, carefully selected training cadre, who would take charge of these volunteers as they came in, and fit them into regiments and separate artillery battalions bearing the numbers of the units fighting in France. My purpose was to indoctrinate each new man, not only with the proud spirit of the division as a whole, but with the spirit of each smaller unit which was then in combat.<sup>33</sup>

His anticipation of casualties alone was not especially visionary; airborne units were predicted to suffer losses and even built up over-strength units intentionally for this reason.<sup>34</sup> However, the plan he developed in response to the anticipated losses indicates his forward thinking, while his decision to leave the training cadre behind reflects his tremendous character. Although the decision was hotly contested by those who were to stay behind, Ridgway stood firm. The result was the division's increased ability to maintain an effective fighting force over the course of a long and arduous campaign in Europe.

Ridgway's plan for reinforcements also illustrates his intimate understanding of Soldiers—what makes them fight and what makes a unit successful in combat. He not only trained replacements on basic infantry skills but also prepared them for their particular unit. Ridgway realized he needed to address morale within units to raise the combat potential of the division as a whole. As green Soldiers were thrown into battle alongside veterans, assimilation was bound to be difficult. Although the new men could learn from the veterans, they had to first prove their mettle. The combat effectiveness of the division depended not only on having 16,000 bodies<sup>35</sup> but also on the trust those 16,000 Soldiers had in one another and the harmony with which they worked. Thus, Ridgway worked to develop a sense of the tradition in the volunteers. His efforts were rewarded by the maintenance of a strong fighting spirit among his Soldiers even when replacements could not keep up with the casualty rate.<sup>36</sup>

Ridgway's emphasis on morale was not confined to the replacement program in England; it was a primary concern during the first days of a recruit's service stateside. Because Ridgway considered morale such an important element of a unit's combat effectiveness, division loyalty was among his first concerns when reactivating the 82d with General Bradley. Following exceptional service in World War I, "with a record of having spent more consecutive days in the line than any other American division in that conflict,"<sup>37</sup> the 82d had been deactivated in 1918. With the reemergence of the German threat in Europe it was reactivated in February 1942.<sup>38</sup> Because "it seemed vitally important to indoctrinate each new recruit with the proud spirit of the old division—to plant in each man's mind the idea that valor endured from generation to generation,"<sup>39</sup> Ridgway and Bradley brought in an old World War I veteran who had served conspicuously with the 82d to relay his story to new recruits. This simple practice had a profound impact on the trainees; Ridgway recounted that they subsequently became endowed with "the conviction that an aggressive soldier, well trained and well armed, can fight his way out of any situation."<sup>40</sup> Ridgway valued the sacrifice and courage of the veterans of the 82d and used their experiences to instill a warrior ethos in his Soldiers.

### **Commanding with Courage**

Subordinate leaders in the 82d during Ridgway's time as commander expressed several key attributes about his character that inspired them, such as his "unbelievable disregard for danger. [At times,] aides had to tackle him to keep him safe."<sup>41</sup> Ridgway's intrepidity in battle endeared him to Soldiers and motivated his officers to similar boldness. He also had exceptionally high standards. He expected a lot from himself and from those serving under him. He "was always forward looking [and] on the offensive . . . [Therefore,] he expected you to do the jobs he gave you without having to be micromanaged."<sup>42</sup> As a result, most leaders under Ridgway shared his proactive mindset and were "inspired by his demands."<sup>43</sup>

This latter area of standards, however, marked both a strength and a weakness for Ridgway. On the one hand, Ridgway saw the potential in those he led and wanted to help them achieve greater success, such as when he volunteered to resume being an official mentor for Alexander after Alexander had been reassigned to a unit outside the 82d. On the other hand, Ridgway could be "a little bit of a hair trigger,"<sup>44</sup> as demonstrated in his interactions with subordinate leaders. Because he never lost sight of either the mission or the troops, he "didn't put up with shortcomings"<sup>45</sup> in these areas. The result was that periodically situations arose in which Ridgway relieved incompetent subordinate commanders.

Ridgway would not accept cowardice or ineptitude among his officers and sergeants because of the emphasis he placed on the combat effectiveness of the division. He believed in what Norton says is the formula for combat effectiveness: training plus trust in leaders.<sup>46</sup>

While Ridgway ensured that the 82d conducted sufficient, realistic training to prepare for combat, he also made certain that the other half of the equation was in place—that the Soldiers trusted their leaders. Thus, if a leader outwardly demonstrated fear or an inability to handle the responsibilities and pressures on him, Ridgway knew he had to be relieved. Regardless of the impact of the dismissal on the individual’s career, such behavior could not, and would not, be tolerated. There were no second chances for blatant violators. The reason: the lives of these commanders’ paratroopers were more important than one person’s career. While Ridgway normally was not anxious to fire leaders,<sup>47</sup> his views on the matter are aptly stated:

But your first consideration must be not for the welfare of the officer in question, but for the lives of the men who are under his command. . . . In time of battle, when victory hangs in the balance, it is necessary to put down any sign of weakness, indecision, lack of aggressiveness or panic, whether the man wears stars on his shoulders or chevrons on his sleeve, for one frightened soldier can infect his whole unit.<sup>48</sup>

In essence, Ridgway’s primary concerns were the morale of the division and their preparation for continued combat. On one occasion Ridgway relieved a commander because he was not at the front where his unit had been surrounded, and because he seemed indifferent and “little interested in the fact that that night we were going to bring his people out of the trap.”<sup>49</sup> Ridgway wanted to have under his command only those individuals who shared his same sense of determination, teamwork and commitment to excellence. Otherwise, his men’s lives would be in jeopardy and their effectiveness as a fighting unit would decrease due to a justifiable loss of trust in their leader. Thus, while relieving an unfit commander “deeply affects the unit concerned,” Ridgway did so when he deemed it better for the unit than leaving such a person in command, which leads to distrust, mission ineffectiveness and wasted lives.<sup>50</sup>

### **Ridgway’s Legacy**

Among the indicators of Ridgway’s success and lasting influence as a pioneer of airborne warfare was his selection to command the XVIII Airborne Corps upon its creation, his rating “by U.S. Army chiefs as the world’s number one active airborne commander,”<sup>51</sup> his impact on subordinate leaders and the continued existence of airborne units following World War II. The first two achievements speak for themselves. As for developing subordinate leaders, Ridgway made an indelible impact on the future of the airborne community through his mentorship of numerous officers, including Major General Maxwell D. Taylor, Major General James M. Gavin, Major General William M. Miley and Major General Joseph M. Swing. These men, outstanding leaders in their own right, were selected to command American airborne divisions following service under Ridgway. As an April 1945 issue of *Time* magazine put it, “Whatever tasks they do, the manner of their doing it will bear a strong stamp of Matt Ridgway . . . [because] ‘Each of them is a hunk of Ridgway.’”<sup>52</sup>

Indeed, these commanders continued the great tradition of visionary leadership that Ridgway had modeled, and they affected the airborne community long after he had moved on in his career.

Another result of Ridgway's methods is the integral role that airborne units continued to have in the U.S. Army following World War II. The success that Ridgway and the 82d experienced toward the end of the war earned them their place in the Army. The 82d

accomplished every assigned mission on or ahead of the time ordered. No ground gained was ever relinquished, and no advance ever halted except on the order of Corps or [Army].<sup>53</sup>

However, without the 82d's success during the Normandy campaign, largely as a result of Ridgway's vision, adjustments and preparatory efforts, American military leaders may have been less likely to continue the use of airborne units following the war. The concept of airborne warfare had come under attack earlier in the war after a fratricide incident reportedly cost 410 paratroopers their lives during the drop on Sicily.<sup>54</sup> "In the following weeks there was a furor over the future employment of airborne troops . . . [and a] thorough investigation."<sup>55</sup> With the future of airborne operations hanging in the balance, and the eyes of senior American military officials on them, the 82d's success in Normandy helped assure the validity of the airborne concept.

Ridgway's impact on the 82d's transition to an airborne division and his efforts in pioneering airborne as a new method of warfare were well summarized in a recommendation for the Distinguished Service Medal:

General Ridgway has focused the full power of his professional skill and pioneering mind to trail-breaking for and accomplishment of the long-range decisive potentialities inherent to large scale Airborne operations, whose value on a large scale he was the first to translate into actual battle experience. . . . The use of large forces of Airborne troops in the immediate future must rely upon the studies, experiences and lessons learned by General Ridgway, whose Division has been the first privileged to test its qualities in actual combat on a scale greater than any previous utilization of such forces. His has been the vision that launched beyond unseen horizons in quest of means to achieve his aims. His has been a constant faith in the ultimate destiny of the decisive value of Airborne operations.<sup>56</sup>

Ridgway's lasting contributions to the 82d, the airborne community and the Allied invasion of Europe are measures of his significance, and his legacy still carries on today. Studying Ridgway's leadership methods provides valuable insight for contemporary military leaders. As the 82d's commander, Ridgway demonstrated his vision and character-based leadership through implementation of novel techniques in airborne warfare, mentoring as well as learning from subordinate commanders, sharing hardships with his troops, standing by his decisions, firing incompetent subordinates and persevering to overcome obstacles.

These leadership attributes mark him as a great leader and remain invaluable as a case study for today's aspiring military leaders.

A study of Ridgway's leadership is key because his vision and character are universally applicable traits and crucial to today's military units. Despite the 62 years since the Normandy invasion, new threats to the American way of life, and the ever-evolving nature of modern warfare, current military leaders will still benefit from applying character and vision-based leadership in a manner similar to Ridgway. During Ridgway's days as commander of the 82d, he and his contemporaries, forever dubbed "the Greatest Generation" by Tom Brokaw,<sup>57</sup> attacked and defeated one of the greatest threats to freedom the world has ever known, Hitler and his Third Reich.

Today, America also faces a threat to freedom. Like Nazism and Fascism, actions undertaken by Islamic extremists have led America into a global struggle against evil. And like Ridgway and the Greatest Generation, today's military leaders are at the tip of the spear in this war. The Global War on Terrorism (GWOT), like airborne warfare during World War II, requires innovative leaders—leaders with character and vision who will successfully prepare their units for battle and take the fight to our enemies. Even more than World War II, however, the GWOT is not a sprint but a marathon. And like World War II and the Cold War that followed, these trying times often do not offer light at the end of the proverbial tunnel. This makes the need for inspiring contemporary leaders, in the mold of Ridgway, even more essential.

America's military needs men and women at all levels who will stand up and say, "I know the way; I know where to go and how to get there; follow me." America's military needs men and women whose units will recognize them as leaders of character and competence, who will develop new ways of defeating terrorists in their area of operations, and who will do so with the utmost integrity. From combat convoy operations to base defense to raids to support functions, today's Ridgways will make a difference through their embodiment of character and exercise of visionary leadership. And today's leaders, like Generals Maxwell Taylor, James Gavin, William Miley and Joseph Swing before them, can become today's Ridgways by studying and applying timeless leadership lessons from his days of pioneering airborne warfare during World War II.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> *The American Heritage College Dictionary, 3d Edition* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1993), p. 235.
- <sup>2</sup> Biographical Sketch of General Matthew Bunker Ridgway, Special Collections Section, United States Military Academy Library, West Point, N.Y. (hereafter referred to as “Biographical Sketch of Ridgway”).
- <sup>3</sup> Interview with Major Kelly Jordan, Department of History, U.S. Military Academy, 8 May 1998.
- <sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>5</sup> Biographical Sketch of Ridgway, p. 2.
- <sup>6</sup> Lieutenant Colonel (P) Duane A. Lempke, “Ridgway’s Leadership Legacy,” *Military Review* (Fort Leavenworth, Kans.: U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, 1966), p. 73.
- <sup>7</sup> General Matthew B. Ridgway, USA Ret., “Leadership,” *Military Review* (Fort Leavenworth, Kans.: U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, 1966), p. 47.
- <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.
- <sup>10</sup> General Matthew B. Ridgway, USA Ret., *Soldier: The Memoirs of Matthew B. Ridgway* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1956), p. 204.
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 119.
- <sup>12</sup> Interview with Colonel Mark Alexander, USA Ret., battalion commander and regimental executive officer in the 82d Airborne Division during World War II, 20 November 2003.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>14</sup> Interview with Major Dick Winters, an officer in the 101st Airborne Division during the Normandy campaign, 25 April 1998.
- <sup>15</sup> Interview with Lieutenant General Jack Norton, USA Ret., a company/battalion commander, battalion executive officer and regimental and division operations officer in the 82d Airborne Division during World War II, 11 November 2003.
- <sup>16</sup> Matthew B. Ridgway Papers, “Excerpts from his notebook on training: 1942,” Box 4, U.S. Army Military History Institute, Carlisle Barracks, Pa.
- <sup>17</sup> Norton interview.
- <sup>18</sup> Ridgway Papers, “Lessons of Airborne Operation in Italy,” Folder: Personal File: 1942–1943, Box 2A.
- <sup>19</sup> Roy E. Lindquist Papers, “Conclusions Reached at the Debriefing Conference on Operation Neptune,” U.S. Army Military History Institute, Carlisle Barracks, Pa.
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>21</sup> Ridgway Papers Memorandum recommending Major General Matthew B. Ridgway be awarded the Distinguished Service Medal, Folder: 201 File, Box 1.

- <sup>22</sup> Ridgway Papers.
- <sup>23</sup> Jordan interview.
- <sup>24</sup> Ridgway Papers, Speech delivered to the 82d Airborne Division by Ridgway upon its movement from Clairborne, La., to Fort Bragg, N.C., Folder: Speeches to his Troops: 1942–1944, Box 4.
- <sup>25</sup> James M. Gavin Papers, Training Program Memorandum, July 1, 1943, Folder: Personal Records to James Gavin, Box 11: Operations Husky and Overlord. U.S. Army Military History Institute, Carlisle Barracks, Pa.
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>27</sup> Norton interview.
- <sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>29</sup> Ridgway Papers, Memorandum from Major General Keyes to Major General Matthew B. Ridgway Expressing Admiration for Feats Accomplished in the Sicily Campaign, Folder: Personal File: 1942–1943, Box 2A.
- <sup>30</sup> Ridgway Papers, “Memorandum on Training while at Camp Clairborne, Louisiana,” Folder: Memoranda on Training, 1942, Box 4.
- <sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>32</sup> Ridgway, *Soldier*, pp. 7–11; Cornelius Ryan, *The Longest Day: June 6, 1944* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1959), pp. 130–141; Ridgway Papers, “Notes for Conference with Unit Commanders, December 28, 1943,” Folder: Historical Record 18 January to 31 December 1944, Box 5A.
- <sup>33</sup> Ridgway, *Soldier*, p. 15.
- <sup>34</sup> Ridgway Papers, Folder: Charles W. Mason: The 82d Under Ridgway, Chapter 5: They Asked No Better Place to Die, p. 1, Box 5.
- <sup>35</sup> Ridgway, *Soldier*, p. 16.
- <sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.
- <sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51.
- <sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 51–52.
- <sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 53.
- <sup>41</sup> Norton interview.
- <sup>42</sup> Alexander interview.
- <sup>43</sup> Norton interview.
- <sup>44</sup> Alexander interview.
- <sup>45</sup> Norton interview.
- <sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

- <sup>47</sup> Alexander interview.
- <sup>48</sup> Ridgway, *Soldier*, p. 121.
- <sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 120.
- <sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 121.
- <sup>51</sup> “World Battlefronts.” *Time*, 65 (1945), p. 27.
- <sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.
- <sup>53</sup> Ridgway Papers, “82d Airborne Division–Operation NEPTUNE,” Folder: 201 File, Box 1.
- <sup>54</sup> Ridgway Papers, “Casualties, Sicilian Campaign,” Folder: 201 File, Box 1.
- <sup>55</sup> Carlo D’Este, *Bitter Victory: The Battle for Sicily, 1943* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1988), p. 309.
- <sup>56</sup> Ridgway Papers, Memorandum Recommending Major General Matthew B. Ridgway be awarded the Distinguished Service Medal. Folder: 201 File, Box 1.
- <sup>57</sup> Tom Brokaw, *The Greatest Generation* (New York: Random House, 2004).