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## A Mission No One Trained For

by

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As with other days that hold special meaning or significance, no one will ever forget where they were or what they were doing at 0905 hours on 11 September 2001. For the soldiers of the Old Guard, it was a routine Tuesday morning. The Primary Funeral Company was performing its missions in Arlington National Cemetery; another company was conducting a Wreath Laying Ceremony at the Tomb of the Unknowns; the rest of the regiment was an hour into "Sergeant's Time." As the morning unfolded, information reached different platoons of Honor Guard Company and thus began an event that no soldier, noncommissioned officer (NCO) or officer had ever fathomed, let alone trained for.

I offer a first-hand account of the events of 11 September and how they effected the members and leadership of one company of soldiers. The reader will find some recurring themes throughout this piece, namely discipline, flexibility and, most important, leadership.

The single most important mission of the NCO Corps is to train soldiers. Whether that

training is ultimately put to use on the field of battle is immaterial to the noncommissioned officer. The reality that the training "might" be used is the basis for our very existence.

In addition to our ceremonial missions, soldiers and NCOs of The Old Guard are routinely placed on "SD" [Special Duty] in support of different activities, including (but not limited to) chaplain support to Arlington National Cemetery and serving as congressional escorts and, most troubling, as Pentagon tour guides.

As the events of 11 September unfolded, 3rd Platoon was conducting civil disturbance training. One of the secondary missions of The Old Guard is to assist in the defense of the National Capitol Region. With massive protests expected for the World Bank meeting in Washington, DC, the company commander had shifted our focus from battle drills to "CD OPS" (civil disturbance operations). As the platoon reviewed previous instruction before moving out, word reached us that a plane had hit the World Trade Center in New York.

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Not wanting to distract from the training event, the platoon sergeant told the soldiers that it was probably "some tourist in a Piper Cub trying to get a good picture." After a good laugh, the training continued. Shortly thereafter, the company training NCO arrived at our training area and relayed a message for all platoons to return to the company immediately. Once again, the platoon sergeant told the soldiers that "we probably have a short-notice mission at the Pentagon for some official visitor to the SECDEF [Secretary of Defense] that somebody forgot about." With another good laugh the platoon returned to the company area. Short-notice ceremonial missions are not unheard-of for Honor Guard Company. As the Joint Service Company, we are responsible for all joint service welcoming ceremonies at the Pentagon, Arlington National Cemetery and the White House. Things like this happen frequently, but not like the Pentagon mission we were about to embark on.

Upon their return to the company, the commander met the platoon sergeant. As the platoon sergeant saluted he, the commander and most of the company felt the ground shake and heard a loud thud, followed by a rumble. We later learned that the sound was the impact of a hijacked plane crashing into the Pentagon. As the commander departed for regimental headquarters, military and civilian police and fire and rescue equipment began to race toward the Pentagon.

The first sergeant began to establish priorities of work. Guards were posted at all entrances and exits. Unnecessary equipment was secured and most importantly, personnel were accounted for. Needless to say, phones were of little use in the minutes and hours following the attack, as spouses frantically tried to contact their husbands, and family members from across the nation tried to contact sons, nephews or grandsons.

The questions on everyone's mind ranged from "What's going on?" to "Are we going?" to "Where are we going?" As squad leaders

were summoned, rumors began to circulate of car bombs going off at the State Department, and the White House and Capitol being attacked.

One of the leadership principles listed in Field Manual (FM) 22-100, *Army Leadership*, is "Keep your subordinates informed." The immediate dissemination of pertinent, relevant information cannot be overstated. What was known was that simultaneous attacks had taken place and that we were now "locked down" in preparation to provide assistance ranging from security at various government sites, to rescue and recovery. This information was immediately passed out to the soldiers. This brief highlight of information alleviated many fears almost immediately. By dispelling rumors and giving the soldiers an immediate focus, the tension around the company area lessened quickly.

As soon as a phone line became available, I contacted my wife and asked her to contact each of the spouses in the platoon. A Family Support Group is an essential part of a unit's deployability. It is a commander's program that is often taken for granted—but not in this case. For many of the soldiers' spouses, the call from the platoon sergeant's wife was the first real news they had heard about their husbands since they had left for work that morning. (The phone calls also identified several shortcomings within the program that have since been remedied.) The Family Support Group/Chain of Concern served to further disseminate needed information and to dispel many unfounded rumors. As all leaders know, if soldiers know their families are being taken care of, they can and will perform their duties better.

More information arrived with the return of two personnel from Arlington National Cemetery—a specialist and a first lieutenant who had witnessed the hijacked plane impact the Pentagon. While not exactly comforting news, this did provide confirmation of what had already been disseminated. The commander

had returned from his briefing and briefed the platoons to be prepared to assume a security mission. The company would *NOT draw weapons until instructed by higher authority*. This also provided a stabilizing effect on the soldiers. As precombat inspections were being conducted by the team and squad leaders, the soon-familiar refrain “be prepared to . . .” was passed to the soldiers. Sometimes knowing where you are *not* going can be as important as knowing where you *are* going.

The commander also directed that the day room television be turned to CNN. This action further kept the soldiers and leaders informed of current developments. From the front porch of our barracks, we could see the smoke rising from the Pentagon. Many soldiers stared in disbelief; others were galvanized by the desire to do something to help.

As the day wore on, plans were made for soldiers to contact spouses. A sleep plan was put into place by the first sergeant. Most leaders reside off post, therefore, sleeping accommodations were at a premium. Without complaint, soldiers shared their barracks rooms with off-post personnel. At approximately 2130, a tasking was received for the company to assist in rescue and recovery operations at the Pentagon. At 0500 the company would muster, and at 0530 we would board transport for the short drive to the Pentagon.

By this time, most soldiers were glued to television sets and contemplating what would be asked of them the following morning. It was at this time that the leaders within the platoon fulfilled another key leadership principle: As the night wore on, team and squad leaders checked on their soldiers to monitor how the soldiers were handling the situation. Later, the platoon sergeant and platoon leader would “drop by” soldiers’ rooms and talk about the soldiers’ concerns, fears and anything else that might come up.

This show of concern for the feelings of the soldiers had two effects. First and foremost,

it helped to assuage some of the fears that the soldiers may have had about the days to come. The second effect was to calm the apprehension of the leaders. While no one wants to admit fear, fear of the unknown knows no rank. Everyone was concerned about what the immediate future would bring. Talking to soldiers about their worries also helped the leaders deal with their own.

This simple act illustrated another principle of leadership: “Know your soldiers and look out for their well-being.” As leaders, noncommissioned officers are routinely asked questions about our soldiers. We see them, live with them and interact with them on a personal level every day, but do we really “know” them? A soldier who might perform flawlessly during more routine activities may not necessarily react to immediate stress the way we think or hope.

As the platoon’s leadership made our rounds of the barracks we noticed some subtle changes in many of our soldiers. Quiet, less participative soldiers became more outgoing and supportive of any mission or activity. Others who had previously been gregarious and highly motivated were somewhat withdrawn. Later in the evening, two such soldiers asked to speak to me on a personal matter. These soldiers were concerned about their ability to “handle” seeing the carnage that was awaiting us at the Pentagon—not so much the wreckage, but the remains. While it may be hard to see a “fortunate turn of events” arising in this scenario, one did exist: As part of our recovery efforts, we would be tasked to provide “outside men.” These soldiers would assist the platoon in donning protective equipment necessary to enter the hazardous environment of the burning Pentagon. Other platoons were able to fill these positions with soldiers who were physically unable to assist in the actual recovery effort. While this luxury probably won’t exist in combat, when such an opportunity presents itself, leaders must act upon it.

The next morning was a testament to the flexibility of the leaders and soldiers of Honor

Guard Company as well as the soldiers of 3rd Platoon. Upon our arrival at the Pentagon, we found that a small city had sprouted up at the crash site. The south end of Corridor Five was still burning. As soldiers and leaders alike girded themselves for entry into the remains of the building, we received a change of mission. The leadership principle: "Employ your unit in accordance with its capability."

At that stage of the recovery mission 30 more soldiers might have been more of a hindrance. Our commander received the mission to assist the Defense Protective Services (DPS) inside the Pentagon. Most uniformed Department of Defense (DoD) police had been on duty for nearly 24 hours. Our mission was to restrict access to several sections of the Pentagon. Building workers had been attempting to reenter damaged sections for reasons ranging from retrieval of classified material to wanting to turn off computers. Needless to say, the Defense Protective Services had other, more pressing missions. Providence again smiled on 3rd Platoon; three of our noncommissioned officers had been Pentagon tour guides. These NCOs had an intimate knowledge of the building layout and had cultivated working relationships with many members of the Defense Protective Service as well as other key personnel within the Pentagon building manager's office. These NCOs proved invaluable in easing the transition of Old Guard soldiers in and DPS officers out. We were later informed that our presence allowed 15 police officers to be reassigned to external security. As we performed our "relief in place," we were also able to ease the transition for a company of military police from the Maryland National Guard. These superb citizen-soldiers were in place and performing their mission within 18 hours of receiving the call.

The internal security mission provided a unique challenge to the Leadership Principle "Ensure the task is understood, supervised and accomplished." Many young soldiers trained

as infantrymen and ceremonial troops now found themselves acting not only as security personnel, but also as on-the-spot crisis counselors. Many times during their shift, soldiers were confronted by civilian employees who were lost or wanted to check on office equipment or even water their plants. Others were faced with flag and general officers who insisted upon entering restricted areas. On one occasion, an officer pointed across the Pentagon courtyard to a column of smoke billowing from a window and asked, "Why can't I go in? That's my office burning!" Team and squad leaders were vital in stabilizing these situations. The platoon sergeant and platoon leader could be summoned via FM radio to any area to deal with these cases. As time passed, the FBI and other federal agencies were allowed to escort certain personnel into sensitive locations. Once again, this mission was nothing that we had ever prepared for, but as leaders we were able to fall back on our General Orders. In short order (about 30 seconds) we realized that this activity was "just another guard mount." Armed with the familiar, the soldiers and leaders quickly adapted to the situation.

Treating the internal security mission as a guard mount allowed the leaders to quickly clarify the mission, making it easily understandable and easy to accomplish. The Principle of Leadership "Develop a sense of responsibility in your subordinate(s)" took hold immediately. Each soldier and leader felt responsible for his piece of the operation and understood how that piece fit into to the bigger operation that was unfolding around them.

As time passed, leaders overheard radio conversations relaying how DPS officers had apprehended several persons of unknown identity, trying to gain access from the outside. None of us knew the reason or even cared to speculate, but this allowed the leaders to easily act upon another Principle of Leadership: "Build the team." Each soldier and leader began to have the feeling that we

were not doing enough to assist in the recovery effort. Soldiers began to confide in their buddies, and later to leaders, that they felt like they weren't doing anything important, or that they felt like they were wasting time that could be more productively used in recovery work. Without hesitation, the team and squad leaders restated the importance of the internal security mission by passing on the facts of our situation, such as the relief of DPS officers, the apprehensions and the stabilizing effect of our presence on building workers. Talk of wasted time quickly vanished as the soldiers realized the important part each of them was playing in the total rescue/recovery effort.

Later that first day, the platoon was tasked to begin the process of recovery. We formed near the medic tent and were issued white protective suits, three sets of gloves, rubber boots, hard hats and respiratory protection. As we prepared to enter the building, the regimental command sergeant major personally briefed us on what we would see and what we would face. This personal, very forthright briefing readied the soldiers and leaders for the upcoming task. The Principle "Set the example" was seen in full view. The RSM (Regimental Sergeant Major) had been inside with each recovery team from the beginning. His actions set the example for all of the leaders of the platoon. He passed on not only his observations, but also his experiences inside the smoldering building. These personal insights empowered the platoon's junior leaders to quickly adapt to what they would find.

Looking back, all of the junior leaders of the platoon and company rose to the challenge of setting the example. Each team and squad leader led from the front into the dark, dangerous ruins of the Pentagon. Each of these young NCOs took it upon himself to shoulder the burden of accountability for his soldiers, to calmly react to the changing and frightening environment in which they found themselves.

As the recovery work continued, soldiers began to find parts of the hijacked aircraft and, sadly, the partial remains of our fellow soldiers. Team and squad leaders would immediately halt all work in the area and summon an FBI agent. After the evidence had been photographed and marked, we could then remove it. With the utmost solemnity, young soldiers would pass the mortuary bag containing the remains to the litter team, who would carry it out of the building. As we exited the building, we would pause near the entrance. Four military chaplains were posted to quickly administer rites as each mortuary bag emerged. This act, coupled with the other chaplains talking to the soldiers, brought a sense of nobility to our mission. As the chaplains spoke, the emotional release was hard to describe. It was as if we were receiving recognition for our service from a long-lost friend. As the mission progressed, the chaplains were always making the rounds of the tents, along with mental health counselors. Soldiers began to joke that you couldn't throw a rock without hitting one.

With the completion of our recovery mission some 10 days later, the command followed up with letters to each soldier and spouse briefly outlining what we had done and how it might affect each of us. A regimental Family Support Group meeting was called and spouses heard first-hand from the commander, command sergeant major and mental health workers who had been with us every step of the way. The care continues. Each soldier has received a mandatory debriefing from mental health workers.

The chain of command is aware of the signs and symptoms of post-traumatic stress and how it affects soldiers. We are watching out for any sign.

This is a brief description of what one company of soldiers was called upon to do. No one ever joined the Army, let alone The Old Guard, with thoughts of someday coming

the rubble of the Pentagon or the World Trade Center. The stresses of the situation in which we found ourselves, however, have direct bearing on the soul of the noncommissioned officer corps. As countless times before, NCOs found themselves in unfamiliar, stressful situations. Those who came before us rose to meet those challenges, as did those who responded on 11 September 2001. Was it a flawless operation? Absolutely not. Were we caught off guard by contradictory information? Absolutely. Did we have to think on our feet? You better believe it. Could we have done better? Probably. This second-guessing is necessary. Call it our after-action review.

I ask you to draw your own conclusions. The purpose of this piece was not to aggrandize or embellish anything, but merely to raise a thought—that we as noncommissioned officers must be prepared to lead our soldiers in any mission and, if needed, to train on the fly—and to confirm some beliefs—that the character of the American soldier has never been stronger. Those of us who witnessed the selfless service of these incredible young men and women have been truly inspired. These soldiers would have moved wreckage with their fingernails if they had been allowed to. In more ways than you might think, these proud, loyal young Americans will serve us all.