

when leaders stop learning...



T H E Y S T O P L E A D I N G

Leadership! One of my favorite subjects! Why? Because I love people, enjoy life, and I believe leadership is about making a positive impact on people, organizations and communities.

with becky halstead

BRIGADIER GENERAL, SOLDIER, US ARMY, RETIRED

Now, before you read any further, take a moment and jot down your definition of leadership—20 words or less. If you have been in more than one leadership position, read your definition one more time. Ask yourself, "Is that what I would have written one, two, three...ten years ago?" I suspect the answer to that question for most of us is "no," because with each new day comes new experiences, new people in our lives, new knowledge, new responsibility, and these things help shape who we are, and how we live and lead our lives. At least for me this has been the case. My definition of leadership has changed many times over, and although I give you my definition at the end of my article, chances are there will be minor changes brewing in my head before this goes to print!

Who am I, what credibility do I have, and what could you possibly learn from me on the subject of leadership? Good questions! My name is Becky Halstead, and in 2008, after 27 years of being a Soldier in the United States Army, I retired from active duty. I was blessed to serve as a leader at every level from Lieutenant to General Officer. Let me state right up front, there is no greater honor than leading America's sons and daughters in service to our Nation. My life is better because of the military men and women with whom I have served. My hope and prayer has always been, and will always be, that maybe their lives are a little better for my having been in it.

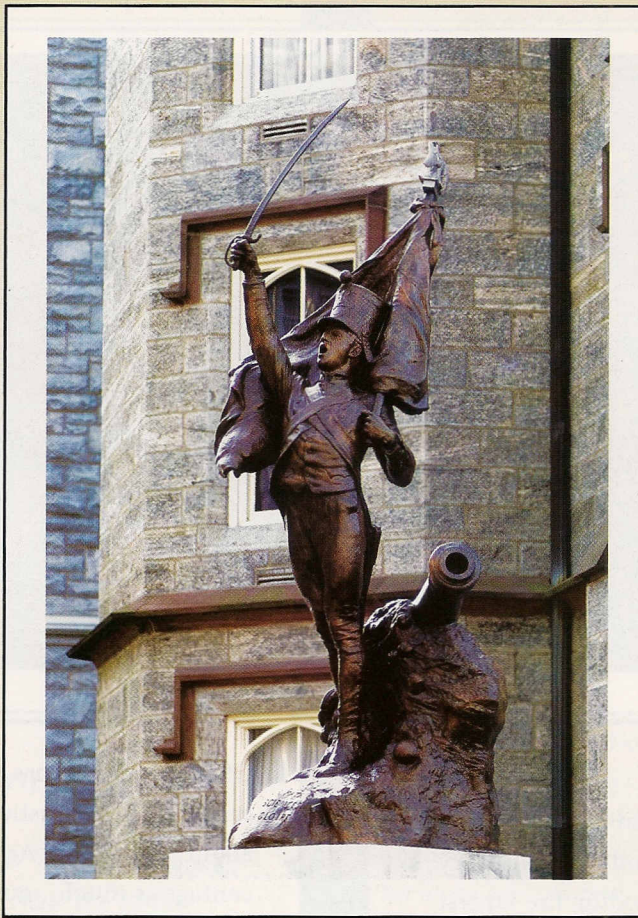
My military journey actually began 32 years ago when I entered West Point. Yes, this is when women were still very new to the Academy, and becoming fully integrated into the Army. I was in the second class of women, and it was definitely a time of signifi-

cant change and challenge, and it was not easy being accepted into the traditional "Long Gray Line" of men. Do not misunderstand; it was not easy for women or men! The year was 1977. Within days of my high school graduation, my parents were driving me from our home, a country town with no traffic lights, from upstate New York, to West Point. I could have never envisioned the journey that would unfold over the next three decades—some of the highest highs and some of the lowest lows, some

exciting "firsts" and some disappointing "lasts." In the end, I can honestly say, "No regrets."

I have been often asked "what am I most proud of?" and "what was my most memorable experience?" I have not yet determined or narrowed the answers to any single event. What I will proclaim is that I loved being a Soldier in service to our Nation, and my greatest HONOR was to LEAD America's sons and daughters. My greatest privilege, although my most emotionally demanding responsibility as a leader, was being the General Officer representative for our Army on several occasions for our Fallen

Comrades. Placing our Nation's flag in the hands of a parent or spouse of a fallen Soldier, on behalf of a grateful Nation, was a turning point for me as a Leader. As each ceremony unfolded, I became acutely aware of the finality of my flag presentation to the family. Deep down inside, I struggled with equal and opposite emotions. On a very emotional level, I was crumbling inside and wanted to drop to my knees, cry, run and hug the family members. As the senior leader representing our Army and Nation, however, I recognized my responsibility to remain professional and steadfast, and to embrace the



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continues...

family with a reassuring strength that the sacrifices will not be forgotten. It is not easy. It is not fun. But, it must be done. This is what leaders do.

I do not pretend to be the expert on leadership, as there are many scholars who are far more intellectually gifted on the subject, and there are leaders who have far exceeded my levels of success. My desire, however, is to share my experiences and stories about leadership with others, as I believe I offer a unique perspective as a female leader in a male dominated, Warrior centric organization. I also believe there is great power in sharing, as it is an effective way of coaching and mentoring those who desire to be better leaders.

I have experienced leading in combat and peace. I was blessed to command units at every level, culminating with commanding the largest logistics command of 20,000 people in Iraq from 2005 to 2006. I was the only female commander at that level, and it was an honor to serve side by side with some of our Army's greatest Division Commanders, as well as with the Iraqi Division Commanders and the Coalition Commanders from Korea, Poland, Britain and Italy. Throughout my career, I was quite often the "only female" in the room or in the command. Although I was used to it, I never stopped being tired of it. There was often a sense of loneliness, which I internalized. There was most always a feeling of being "measured up" against the rest. Over the years, I



witnessed the acceptance of women in the Army at a far greater pace than appreciation for women in the Army. I repeatedly practiced "building a bridge and getting over it." My greatest motivation, encouragement, and inspiration came from some phenomenal senior, male leaders who really believed our Army is great "because of women" not "in spite of women."

During my 27 years in the Army, I had 18 different duty assignments, commanded over 11 years, vis-

ited over 40 countries, and deployed to Afghanistan and Iraq. I was exposed to a tremendously great number of leaders, both senior and subordinate to me. I learned how to be a better leader from both my higher and lower leaders, and good and bad leaders. You might say I lived in a "leadership laboratory" for my entire career.

Of note, women are increasingly achieving the higher ranks, but statistically women represent only about 15% of the Army. At the higher ranks, the percentage is much, much lower. As such, I never worked for a female boss my entire career.

As I reflect back, and focus my thoughts on the leadership I was exposed to, mentored by, and learned from, I have attempted to do two things for the reader. One, give you my definition of leadership, and two, create my "top ten" thoughts about leaders, leading and leadership.

First, my definition of leadership: "Leadership is the fusion of heart and mind in selfless action, for the betterment of others, to effectively accomplish the mission and make a difference." Now, in all honesty, I am working on that definition most every day!

Lastly, as David Letterman would say, "the top ten things" you need to know about leadership and being a leader:

10) *The best leaders listen hard, think forward, take time to reflect and stay real.*

9) *A leader's success is only as good as the people he/she has led. Leaders motivate when they appreciate!*

8) *To be a great leader, you must first know how to serve others.*

7) *Leadership is about character, and character has no race, no gender, no rank or title.*

6) *Real, caring, and passionate leaders understand the requirement to become more selfless the higher they go, not more self-centered.*

5) *Effective leaders practice "rank has its responsibilities" not "rank has its privileges."*

4) *If you have to keep reminding people you are the leader, then you probably are not.*

3) *The most effective leaders are those who are not intimidated by the intellect, talent and experiences of others. On the contrary, they seek out, respect and surround themselves with the experts (not to be confused with "yes" people).*

2) *If leadership were easy, everybody would be doing it.*

And, the number one thing you need to know about leadership is,

1) *The first person you lead is you. This means you have to take care of yourself—physically, mentally, spiritually—because your people need you.*

"Leadership is the fusion of heart and mind in selfless action, for the betterment of others, to effectively accomplish the mission and make a difference."

Becky Halstead served 27 years with the U.S. Army and retired as a General Officer. Her career culminated as the Commanding General of the Army's Ordnance Center and Schools (equivalent to President of a University). She is an experienced leader and logistician, effective communicator, and strategic planner with exceptional

organizational skills. Graduating from West Point in 1981 as a U.S. Army Ordnance Officer, she was the first female graduate of West Point to be promoted to General Officer. She was also the first female in U.S. history to command in combat at the strategic level. Becky has a B.S. in Engineering from West Point, an M.S. in National Resource Strategy (Advanced Manufacturing) from the Industrial College of the Armed Forces, National Defense University, and an M.S. in Advanced Military Studies (Visionary Leadership) from the Army Command and General Staff College. She is a lifetime member of the Association of the United States Army and the Ordnance Corps Association. Becky is also a recipient of the 2007 National Women's History Project (Generations of Women Moving History Forward). She currently is the Executive Director for Leader Development with The Praevius Group. Keep an eye out for her upcoming book on her memoirs and how faith, family and freedom have impacted her life. **CW**