

Concept

a powerful, intriguing, inspiring, or perhaps odd idea distilled to its essential elements

The Bronze Star

When Leadership Is a Life-or-Death Responsibility.



By Richard C. Crabbs

Our patrol left at dusk. It was my first ambush patrol since my year's tour of duty started in Vietnam, and I was 21. All I could think about while riding on the armored cavalry assault vehicle was whether I would be returning to base camp in the morning dead, or alive. Ambush patrol, usually 10 to 12 soldiers, has one mission: to warn the base camp of impending enemy attack. Better to have a few men killed instead of many more.

My orders were simple: I was to set up a secured perimeter, stay up all night, and keep a watchful eye for the enemy. Upon arrival at our site, I went about my task to set up Claymore mines and trip flares. As I was setting up one of the flares, it went off in my hands. The whole area lit up like it was daytime. All I could do for the next several minutes (it seemed a lot longer) was lie down on the ground and pray no enemy was within sight. A medic treated my burned hands with a salve, but it did little to ease the pain of that mishap. To my surprise later, the patrol leader never chewed me out.

I learned a valuable lesson that day: People make mistakes. When you do, handle the situation, make the best of it, and move on. You will learn from it. Just at daybreak, we were picked up to return to base camp, lucky to have avoided any confronta-

tion. My burning hands seemed much less painful.

From my Army experiences, and my business career, I've built on the philosophy that one should always do the best he or she can no matter how seemingly insignificant the assigned task might be. Many people might not know that you can receive the Bronze Star for work excellence as well as valor. I was recognized for my service in various operations in the field and later working in the adjutant's office by being awarded the Bronze Star Medal for Meritorious Achievement.

Drawing on my Vietnam tour of duty, I discovered early in my business career that it's easier to train and work with employees when the leader is willing to admit that he or she was once in their position looking for guidance. It may sound simplistic, but instill in your employees a work ethic that they should undertake a project with enthusiasm no matter how trivial they think it may be. Reward them when they do a good job, but let them learn by their mistakes.

Perhaps it would help to remember that a mistake at work will probably not be life-threatening.

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