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Everything I Know About Leadership, I Learned from a Can of Peaches

In the summer of 1961, I raised my hand with the rest of the US Coast Guard Academy Class of 1965 and swore to "support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic."

On the banks of the Thames River, I learned about things like teamwork, uniform maintenance, the activities and condition of an anonymous bovine, calculus, small boat handling, Connecticut College, "serving fives," knots-manship, close order drill, Connecticut College, Eagle seamanship, Coast Guard history, the definition of "getting bilged," Connecticut College, the definition of "getting dumped," where I was born, and esprit de corps. Two years later I left the academy and enlisted in the U.S. Marine Corps. By 1967, I was a sergeant assigned to an infantry company of the 2nd Battalion 26th Marines in I Corps near the DMZ in the Republic of Vietnam.

We were about two weeks into a 30-day sweep and destroy mission and had spent the better part of that time moving through triple canopy jungle. We had made contact with the enemy several times and had taken a number of casualties. In addition, we were running low on ammunition, food, and supplies because the helicopters that we relied on for replenishment couldn't resupply us due to the dense jungle canopy.

Finally, we found a clearing large enough for the helos to attempt a resupply, and, as an added bonus, it had a stream running through it where we could bathe. We set up a perimeter around the clearing and put out listening posts (LPs) to provide advanced warning of any enemy activity.

As all too often happens in infantry units, I had become the senior man in the platoon through the process of attrition. Our lieutenant and platoon sergeant were both gone along with two sergeants who were senior to me. Like it or not, I was in command. I viewed this as a win-win situation because, if I did well, it would certainly be a feather in my cap. On the other hand, if I screwed it up, they would surely chalk up my failures to the fact that I had never been trained to perform the duties of a lieutenant, and therefore hold me blameless. The problem with this second scenario was someone could get hurt or killed, and I was among the candidates for this unsavory distinction.

When the helos arrived, they couldn't get into the zone, so they hovered and dropped us supplies, lowering the more fragile items in slings. Among the items they dropped were several cardboard cases containing #10 cans of sliced cling peaches in heavy syrup. To us, they were worth their weight in gold - no, they were worth far more because we couldn't eat gold. I quickly directed that our share be distributed to the platoon, and emphasized the importance of getting a ration to everyone who was on watch on the perimeter and out on LPs.

About 15 minutes later, a lance corporal brought me one of the big cans with four or five golden yellow peach slices floating in clear nectar near the bottom. He handed me the can and said they were mine. I asked him if everyone had gotten some and he said, "As far as I know." I took my KA-BAR out of its sheath, wiped the blade off on my filthy trousers, and stabbed the first peach slice. Although it was as tender as it could be, I chewed it for a long time, like it was a piece of tough steak, in order to savor the sweet, pungent peach flavor as long as possible.

As I was enjoying the last of my treasure, the captain, who was the company commander, asked me if everybody in the platoon had gotten some peaches.

"Yes, sir," I replied.

Just then, a private first class who had been on the perimeter walked up to me and said, "Sarge, I heard we got some peaches. Are there any left?"

"Didn't you get any?" The captain asked.

"No, sir," was the reply. "I was out on the perimeter."

The captain turned to me and said, "Sergeant, I'd like a word with you," and walked away from the group.

I followed him down to the stream where he picked a place with no one around, stopped, and turned to face me.

"I thought you told me everybody in the platoon got some peaches."

"I thought everyone had, sir."

"Obviously, you thought wrong," he said. "I know you're new to commanding a platoon, and you've never received the training for it; but you're not new to the Marine Corps, and you have been trained to be a Marine. During that training, you were taught the two objectives of Marine Corps leadership, the fourteen traits of a leader of Marines, and the ten Marine Corps leadership principles. I don't have time to give you a crash course in how to become a platoon commander, so I'm going to make this real simple for you. Follow just this one leadership principle, "set the example," and all the rest of the principles will take care of themselves.

Beyond that, remember there are only two leadership objectives in the Marine Corps: the first is to accomplish the mission, and the second is to take care of your troops, in that order of priority. You're not John Wayne and this isn't Hollywood, so you're not going to be able to accomplish the mission all by yourself. Your job is to lead those troops so they can accomplish the mission as a unit, and their job is to accomplish that mission at all costs. You're asking a helluva lot from them, and they'll do it. But they've got to know - you'll take care of them when they need it. They need to know that if they're wounded, you'll get them out, and if they're KIA, you won't leave them behind, and if there are peaches, you'll make sure they get their share.

You're depending on them to get the job done, and they're depending on you to watch out for their welfare. You don't even think about eating until you're certain that every one of your troops has been fed. You don't even think about sleeping until you make sure that every single one of your troops has a place to bed down. And you don't even dream about having peaches until you know for a fact that every one of your troops has had his peaches. It's that simple. Do you have any questions?"

"No, sir," I said. "I'm sorry."

"I don't want you to be sorry," he replied. "I want you to be good! And I know you can be, sergeant. You've got all the traits of a good leader - just remember what I told you and you'll do fine." And he turned away from me and strode off.

Later that same year, I was meritoriously promoted to staff sergeant by Lieutenant General Victor H. Krulak, Commanding General, Fleet Marine Force, Pacific for "meritorious service in combat." Of course, I didn't do it all alone after all I wasn't John Wayne and we weren't in Hollywood. It was the guys in that platoon that compiled such a great record.

My part was easy - I just made damn sure they "got their peaches."

I've always been more of an operational guy than a staff type, so in my 26 years in the Marine Corps, I had a number of commands. I loved being a commanding officer and I eagerly sought out every opportunity to command - in my mind, becoming a commanding officer should be the *raison d'etre* for every military officer. As a commanding officer, I always tried to pass praise for the command's achievements down to the troops, and I always tried to intercept any criticism of the command's performance before it got to the troops by taking responsibility for any perceived shortcomings.

And I always made sure my troops got their peaches.