

## Chapter 40

### Humble Warriors

*Humility is the gateway to lasting relationships*

One of my dad's favorite expressions was "Lawson, remember your friends on the way up because you may meet them on the way down." He would say that to me every time I received special recognition or an early promotion ahead of my peers. His expression was all about my remaining humble and avoiding becoming arrogant. His advice, coupled with Gloria's gentle reminders along the way, kept my ego under control. I worked hard at not seeking the limelight and focusing my efforts downward rather than upward to my superior.

I had some wonderful role models of humility during my military career. In a sometimes egocentric profession, several leaders demonstrated for me the behaviors of a humble leader. They positively impacted and shaped my behavior particularly when I became a general officer. Let me mention a few.

Colonel (Retired) Frank Cox. Frank is from Clemson University "royalty." He was born and raised in Clemson, South Carolina, where his father was dean of students and later president of the University. Frank attended the University, and he and his brother played on the football team. The main boulevard and a special statue honor his father. I have known Frank almost all my adult life. We first met in Vietnam in early 1970 when we were on a brigade staff together. We shared the same sandbagged hooch for over four months. Working together in a stressful, tense combat environment 24/7 will forge lasting friendships. After Vietnam, we served again in the same brigade in the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne. His spouse, Crossie, who also went to Clemson, and Gloria became lifelong friends. Although we never served together again, we stayed in touch through the years. After I retired, Frank got me a job in

Battelle Memorial Institute (a nonprofit technology company) and helped me learn all about business. Later, I brought Frank on as a member of our company. He is now one of our wonderful coaches and facilitators.

Frank and Crossie moved back to Clemson after he retired from Battelle and now live in the family home. Even though the Cox name is prominent in town and at the University, Frank and Crossie avoid the limelight and focus on giving back to their community. Crossie has served multiple terms on the city council and Frank volunteers in his church, the local Rotary Club, and in support of the ROTC detachments. They both have servant hearts and are ever focused on others.

Frank demonstrates the following behaviors of a humble leader: he is a selfless servant leader always focused on the needs of others; he deflects compliments and always wants to focus on recognizing others; he is self-reflective and openly shares his story and values with others; and he has always been passionately curious and wanting to improve his performance. Quite simply, Frank is the humblest human being I have ever known.

Major General (Retired) Eldon Bargewell. Eldon and I first met when I assumed command of Bravo Company, 2d Ranger Battalion in March 1975. He was one of my four platoon leaders. By that time, Eldon had served in Vietnam as a young Special Forces NCO and earned the second highest award for valor, the Distinguished Service Cross, for saving his team in a fierce firefight. He was later commissioned through Officer Candidate School. He was a second lieutenant when we started the company. The other five lieutenants in the company outranked him, but he was the most experienced and most highly decorated lieutenant in the battalion.

With all his combat experience and technical know-how, Eldon could have come across as a know-it-all. But he did not. He was extremely quiet about his exploits and shied away from talking about his combat experience. He did not want the limelight at all. He just wanted to quietly go about learning how to become a good officer, platoon leader, and teammate.

During that period, we had seven months to form the company and conduct training from individual all the way through to company training. In platoon training, the platoon leaders and platoon sergeants had responsibility to conduct the training of their units. I had the oversight and coaching role.

After the first of three weeks of platoon training, I realized Eldon's platoon was advancing much faster than the other three. I held a company training meeting every Friday focused on what I and others observed during the week and planned for the next week's training. I would ask each platoon leader to share their observations. When I got to Eldon, he had little to offer and spoke in generalities. I had to coach him into sharing specifics. After the meeting, I asked him to stay behind. We sat down together, and I told him we were all in this together and I needed him to share his observations and vast experience with the others. He told me, "Sir, I just don't want to be in the spotlight. I don't want to be showboating." I responded, "I understand, but I don't think you want me to be continually extolling all the great things you and your platoon are doing. It is better that you professionally share what you and your platoon have learned. We must have open communications for the unit to improve. I need your help." With that discussion, Eldon opened up, was even more respected by our leadership team, and we developed into a highly trained, winning team.

What I most admired about Eldon, the humble Ranger, were his willingness to receive feedback; his desire to learn and grow; his calmness under the most stressful situations; and his recognition of his Rangers. It did not surprise me that he went on to greatness serving for over 30 years in our special operating forces. He commanded Delta Force and served in the most challenging general officer positions in combat. He died tragically last year, and I attended his funeral. It was hard to say farewell to my friend who defined competence and humility for each of us who had the honor of serving with him.

General (Retired) David Bramlett. I had the honor of working for then-Brigadier General Bramlett when I was a brigade commander in the 25<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, Hawaii. He became my coach and mentor for 18 months and defined for me generalship and competence. He had a reputation in his younger days in Vietnam as an aggressive, hard-charging infantry leader. He was highly decorated for his courage under fire. That was not the General Bramlett I knew years later. He was the most self-effacing, modest senior leader I ever observed. He was a role model for me in how a general officer should conduct himself. Just a few examples:

Whenever he would arrive to observe a unit orders briefing or unit training, he wanted to sit or stand in the back and not be the center of attention. He always carried a little green memo book to take notes. He seldom asked questions during the event but afterward he would pull the senior leader aside and quietly provide feedback. It would always be in the form of a dialogue and leading questions like “Have you considered...?” Unless there was a standard not being adhered to, he never was directive. He believed in learning by doing.

When the other brigade commanders would meet with him for a periodic meeting, I always felt our opinions were respected. He truly

listened and took notes. He was always timely with feedback and responses. He was supported by a wonderful Army spouse, Judi. She was a down-to-earth, practical senior spouse who was key to building strong bonds between the couples in our social group. She also helped her husband “lighten up” and have balance in his life.

General Bramlett was a master at providing timely feedback; showing public appreciation for a job well done; and allowing his subordinates to do their job without his interference. He truly was a team builder who empowered us to make decisions within his or the commanding general’s intent.

Lieutenant General (Retired) Steve Arnold. I had the privilege of working for then-Major General Steve Arnold for an exciting year in the 10<sup>th</sup> Mountain Division. It was a year with back-to-back deployments to South Florida for Hurricane Andrew Relief followed by Operation Restore Hope in Somalia. I have described both extraordinarily successful operations in detail in previous chapters. Our success can be greatly attributed to the leadership of Steve Arnold. He was absolutely the right senior leader at the right time to navigate our way through some challenging and oftentimes ambiguous waters.

Steve Arnold was cut out of the same bolt of humble cloth as David Bramlett. In all my time with him, I never heard him utter the word “I.” Even though the modern 10th Mountain was making history on its first division deployments since World War II, his entire focus was on our team accomplishing the mission while taking care of our soldiers. On both operations, he demonstrated the following behaviors of humble leader: he accepted, and even thrived on, ambiguity and uncertainty; he remained calm under pressure from higher authority or conditions on the ground; faced with ever-changing conditions or new situations, he strongly solicited and used input from team members at all levels;

he admitted mistakes and used them as teachable moments; he was a stand-up leader who accepted complete responsibility for his actions; and he allowed us to do our job.

An example was in Somalia when I led a combined task force 250 miles away from his location. We would communicate only once daily. We would have one nightly update phone call where I would describe our actions over the past 24 hours, what we had planned for the next 24 hours, and where we needed his help. On every phone call he would patiently listen and then provide clear and concise guidance. He always took the time to fully understand our challenges so he could appropriately represent us when communicating with the joint task force commander. He was a tremendous advocate for what we were doing, and when a crisis occurred was always in our court. Steve Arnold truly excelled under pressure because he was competent, a man of the highest character, authentic, and humble. I will be ever grateful for his tremendous leadership of our division as we made history.

The common thread that ran through the four leaders was that people willingly wanted to follow them and not disappoint them. They were highly respected for their competence, character, and humility. Their legacies are the people they touched along the way who have, like them, made a positive difference in thousands of lives.