

Case Analysis: Hill 180

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February 7th, 1951, on a road near Soam-ni, Korea, Chinese forces atop a hill ambush a company of roughly 100 US Army soldiers. One platoon is pinned down and in danger of being wiped out. Led by company commander Captain Lewis Millett, an officer whose name is now legendary among military historians, the other two platoons charged up the hill with bayonets fixed, killing more than 100 enemy soldiers.

Many things happened in a peculiar way in order for that event to occur and the US forces to prevail. The military services, collectively and individually, are a Community of a Practice; a Professional Learning Community (PLC). Individuals learn from one another, more experienced persons teaching less experienced persons. Knowledge is exchanged among peers, improving the quality of work produced. All of this learning is to a common end; war-fighting and battle-winning. Culture, behavior, language and work are all built around common ideas, communication, and a network of respect and how to earn it. That is, there exists a road that will allow a learner/soldier to become a more valuable member of this community.

In order to become part of this community, a civilian must pass through the indoctrination process of boot camp, an advanced infantry course and a specialization course. If a combat action can be viewed as comparable to any other human endeavor, which requires intellectually and socially competent, complete persons, then one great responsibility of leadership in the military is tending to those basic needs, which contribute to personal growth. Here Maslow's Hierarchy of Hierarchy of Needs, taken in

the context of the distinction between war and the industrial world (making “safety” and “survival” somewhat subjective), suggests that soldiers are likely to perform better when the basics are taken care of.

The US military is very good at maintaining taking care of those fundamentals, even under the worst conditions. Commanders tend to understand that the personal development and growth of their soldiers tends to directly correlate to the parent unit’s success.

However, just a few after the skies over Europe and Japan had cleared of fighter and bomber aircraft and the first jets were seeing action in Korea, the US Army began using bayonets and close combat far less frequently, preferring the rifle and machine gun. Military minds were coming to the conclusion that time of close combat had gone and that all killing in war was to take place at great range from then on.

Even close combat in aircraft was vanishing, with a new family of military aircraft that relied entirely on rockets and missiles but were not equipped with machine guns for dog fighting. It could be argued that primary reinforcer of this thinking was simple survival. The farther away an ally could kill the other person, the easier it was to do so with impunity. Cultural pressures largely kept those of a different opinion from dissenting. An unwillingness to field other viewpoints is one of principle banes of a PLC.

Chinese forces in Korea realized this unwillingness of US forces to close with cold steel, a lesson that lingered onward to the Vietnam War. The result was that many units were not given deep close combat training and did not have their bayonets prepared to be used. This behavior was reinforced by the natural respondent behavior of fear. That is,

troops were rewarded by not having to perform the more frightening task of closing with the enemy and, as Lt Col David Grossman described, endure killing at the most emotionally costly range.

Upon learning that the Chinese forces did not think that US forces were willing to fight with steel, Capt Millett instituted a behavior modification plan in his company. He did the following:

- Added regular bayonet training to his units' training schedules
- Incorporated the application of those techniques in the field to include practice thrusts and charges, and the fixing of bayonets at all times
- Increased the number of machine guns in each squad so that the enemy would be fixed in place until his soldiers could get to bayonet range

Training and repetition help overcome that respondent behavior and replaces it with conditioned reinforcers such as the intrinsic satisfaction of doing this important work which is challenging, frightening but at which the individual is competent. That is supported by the extrinsic support from camaraderie, pay, awards and advancement.

As mentioned previously, this was only possible because soldiers (learners) already possessed a tactical and cultural knowledge base, reinforced by others within the community. While schools today still largely teach memorization/declarative knowledge, in this case (and largely across the military) learners generate knowledge that is added to the collective. It is this kind of learning that leads to experimentation that gives warfighters the tools they will need to adapt to the unpredictable battlefield.

References

Glenn, J. (2002) Cold steel in Korea. *Military History*. Feb 2002, Vol. 18, Issue 6, p54-61