

Uniformed Service - Why Are There Only A Few Good Men?

Introduction.

News of misconduct or incompetence involving people in uniform always sadden me. It doesn't matter if they happen to be of people in the Armed Forces, Home Team, Civil Defence or other uniformed organization, they are still about people in uniform. During the month of July 2013, news concerning prison inmate deaths, assaults on Prison Officers by inmates, murders committed by a Singapore Police Officer and some others were found in the news. No one looks forward to seeing news of this sort, but they do happen.



The bandwagon, knee-jerk reaction is usually cries for overhaul, more leniency towards criminals and greater recognition of their “rights”, stricter and more restrictive rules for the people in uniform, higher government spending and so forth.

I offer a slightly different view. My mind went back to this passage in the science fiction work by Robert A Heinlein, “Starship Troopers”. It is taken from Chapter Six and describes what happens after a recruit in the Federation was given ten lashes and a bad conduct discharge for striking his instructor during a field exercise.

Zim said stiffly, “Captain, that boy doesn’t rate ten lashes.”

Frankel answered, “Of course he doesn’t. You know who goofed – and so do I.”

“Yes, Sir, I know.”

“Well? You know even better than I do that these kids are wild animals at this stage. You know when it’s safe to turn your back on them and when it isn’t. You know the doctrine and the standing orders about article nine-oh-eight-oh – you must never give them a chance to violate it. Of course some of them are going to try it – if they weren’t aggressive they wouldn’t be material for the M.I. They’re docile in ranks; it’s safe enough to turn your back when they’re eating, or sleeping, or sitting on their tails and being lectured. But get them out in the field in a combat exercise, or anything that gets them keyed up and full of adrenalin, and they’re as explosive as a hatful of mercury fulminate. You know that, all you instructors know that; you’re trained – trained to watch for it, trained to snuff it out before it happens. Explain to me how it was possible for an untrained recruit to hang a mouse on your eye? He should never have laid a hand on you; you should have knocked him cold when you saw what he was up to. So why weren’t you on the bounce? Are you slowing down?”

“I don’t know,” Zim answered slowly. “I guess I must be.”

“Hmmm! If true, a combat team is the last place for you. But it’s not true. Or wasn’t true the last time you and I worked out together, three days ago. So what slipped?”

Zim was slow in answering. *“I think I had him tagged in my mind as one of the safe ones.”*

“There are no such.”

“Yes, sir. But he was so earnest, so doggedly determined to sweat it out – he didn’t have any aptitude but he kept on trying – that I must have done that, subconsciously.” Zim was silent, then added, “I guess it was because I liked him.”

Frankel snorted, *“An instructor can’t afford to like a man.”*

“I know it, sir. But I do. They’re a nice bunch of kids. We’ve dumped all the real twerps by now – Hendrick’s only shortcoming, aside from being clumsy, was that he thought he knew all the answers. I didn’t mind that; I knew it all at that age myself. The twerps have gone home and those that are left are eager, anxious to please, and on the bounce – as cute as a litter of collie pups. A lot of them will make soldiers.”

“So that was the soft spot. You liked him...so you failed to clip him in time. So he winds up with a court and a whip and a B.C.D. Sweet.”

Zim said earnestly, *“I wish to heaven there were some way for me to take that flogging myself, sir.”*

“You’d have to take your turn, I outrank you. What do you think I’ve been wishing the past hour? What do you think I was afraid of the moment I saw you come in here sporting a shiner? I did my best to brush it off with administrative punishment and the young fool wouldn’t let well enough alone. But I never thought he would be crazy enough to blurt it out that he’d hung one on you – he’s stupid; you should have eased him out of the outfit weeks ago...instead of nursing him along until he got into trouble. But blurt it out he did, to me, in front of witnesses, forcing me to take official notice of it – and that licked us. No way to get it off the record, no way to avoid a court...just go through the whole dreary mess and take our medicine, and wind up with one more civilian who’ll be against us the rest of his days. Because he has to be flogged; neither you nor I can take it for him, even though the fault was ours. Because the regiment has to see what happens when nine-oh-eight-oh is violated. Our fault... but his lumps.”

“See that you do. Because when the next kid starts swinging, it’s got to be stop-punched – not muffed, like today. The boy has got to be knocked cold and the instructor must do so without ever being touched himself – or I’ll damn well break him for incompetence. Let them know that. They’ve got to teach those kids that it’s not merely expensive but impossible to violate nine-oh-eight-oh...that even trying it wins a short nap, a bucket of water in the face, and a very sore jaw – and nothing else.”

“Yes, sir. It’ll be done.”

“It had better be done. I will not only break the instructor who slips, I will personally take him ‘way out on the prairie and give him lumps...because I will not have another one of my boys strung up to that whipping post through sloppiness on the part of his teachers. Dismissed.”

You get the drift?

First – any misconduct or incompetence on the part of a person in uniform can never be tolerated. That implies that they must be extremely well trained, and that competency levels are maintained at an extremely high level.

Second – instructors, prison wardens, police officers, soldiers, etc, cannot afford to fraternize with the people they are serving, whether those people be trainees, prisoners or simply members of the public. People in uniform have a job to do and they are expected to do so professionally. Like bouncers in an establishment.

Now do you understand why there are so few really great people in uniform?

The same principles that govern how uniformed personnel are supposed to discharge their duties is applicable to leadership in any enterprise. Make sure you acquire and retain a high degree of competence, and make sure you discharge your duties responsibly without fear or favour.

When that is established, expect great things to happen!