

Leadership That Inspires Excellence

Brig Gen Steve Ritchie

We fight wars with machinery, but we win wars with people.

—Gen George S. Patton

It was one of the most carefully planned missions of the Linebacker campaign. For days, with the help of the latest special intelligence-gathering techniques, we studied the routes, orbit points, formations, and tactics of the enemy. We selected 10 May 1972 to put to the test what we had learned. At 0500 hours, the 432d Tactical Fighter/Reconnaissance Wing briefing took place as it did every day, seven days a week. We then broke for individual flight briefings to review each detail of what was likely to occur during the next few hours as we prepared to launch for various destinations over North Vietnam.

I was number three, or deputy flight leader, of Oyster Flight. Oyster was the ingress flight led by Maj Bob Lodge, a friend, a fellow 1964 graduate of the Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs, Colorado, and one of my former students in the Air Force “Top Gun” school at Nellis Air Force Base (AFB), Nevada.

Our McDonnell Douglas F-4 Phantoms were the first four aircraft to penetrate North Vietnamese airspace, paving the way for the strike force to follow. Our mission was to intercept and defeat enemy fighters that would attempt to prevent our strike Phantoms from dropping their highly accurate laser-guided bombs.

After a brief delay for foul weather in the target area, the mission was a “go.” Following tanker rendezvous shortly after takeoff to top off our fuel tanks, Oyster Flight dropped to treetop level and proceeded inbound low enough to be under enemy radar surveillance. We employed radio silence procedures to reduce the chances of being detected. Reaching our planned orbit point some 25 to 30 miles west of Hanoi, we stayed below 300 feet as planned and continued radio silence. Using the latest, highly classified, high—technology equipment—available in only a few of our best airplanes—we electronically spotted a flight of four MiG-21s in orbit northwest of Hanoi. Intelligence had pre-

dicted this situation, and our plan was to wait until the MiGs departed their holding pattern to attack our strike force as it approached from the southwest. We would then “pop up” to meet the Soviet-built fighters head-on.

Our orbit was then below the effective altitude for surface-to-air missiles (SAM) and heavier antiaircraft artillery (AAA), so small arms fire and light AAA were the only nuisance as we waited.

Right on schedule, the MiG-21s departed orbit, and we rolled out on a northerly heading, pointing our radar sensors skyward to achieve full system radar lock-ons at 15 miles. Our adrenaline surged as the battle developed at a closing rate of more than 1,200 miles per hour. Visual engagement was only moments away. The computer for our Sparrow radar missiles flashed that we were in range, and, as briefed, our first two jets (Oyster One with Bob Lodge and Roger Locher and Oyster Two piloted by John Markle and Steve Eaves) fired head-on at seven miles.

Within seconds, fireballs and smoke trails filled the air, and debris was falling all around us. Two MiG-21s had been destroyed. Lodge and I, in Oyster One and Three, immediately turned our fighters as hard as possible to achieve rear-quarter positions on the remaining two MiGs. I locked on to the third MiG using the autoacquisition switch on the left throttle and fired two Sparrows at a range of 6,000 feet. The second missile exploded under the fuselage of the North Vietnamese fighter, and the pilot bailed out as his craft burst into flames at 15,000 feet above sea level.

Meanwhile Lodge and Locher were positioning for a shot at MiG number four. What a great day it was going to be—a perfectly planned, perfectly executed mission, resulting in four American victories. But it was too good to be true. As Oyster One, piloted by a crew with over 400 combat missions (a crew largely regarded as the best in Southeast Asia), was about to claim its second MiG of the day, an unanticipated obstacle appeared. A flight of four MiG-19s stormed in from above and behind.

“Oyster One—Break!—Break!” we screamed, “MiG-19s at six o’clock—Oyster One, Oyster One—Break! MiG-19s firing! ”

But Lodge and Locher, concentrating on the MiG-21, missed our frantic calls, and 30-millimeter rounds from the MiG-19s peppered the wings and fuselage of the American

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fighter. Within seconds, the Phantom II burst into flames and rolled.

“Bail out! Bail out!” I yelled. “Bail out!”

At 7,000 feet, upside down and on fire, the Phantom was out of control. What began as a triumph was ending in tragedy. Two of America’s finest young officers, and two very close friends, were going down in flames, and Oyster Two, Three, and Four were being chased out by the remaining MiG-21 and the MiG-19s. It was not supposed to end that way.

Throughout the following week, we returned to the area and called on the radio, hoping that Lodge and Locher, who carried survival radios with extra batteries, had somehow managed to bail out—hoping that our calls would be returned by one, or even both. But our calls went unanswered. We finally resigned ourselves to the probability that they had been killed or captured (though their names never appeared on the list released by the North Vietnamese of those taken prisoner on or after 10 May), and we were ready to give up.

Then, 22 days later, on 1 June, our strike force was in the vicinity of Yen Bai Airfield, some 70 miles northwest of Hanoi. Momentary silence filled the air, then came a piercing call: “Any US aircraft—this is Oyster-Zero-One-Bravo—over.”

We don’t have an Oyster call sign today, I thought, but my backseater, Chuck DeBellevue, shouted, “My God, that’s Roger Locher!” We answered, and Roger said, “Hey guys, I’ve been down here a long time. Any chance of picking me up?”

“You bet—you bet there is!”

Back at Udorn Royal Thai Air Base we quickly planned and launched a rescue mission. It was one of the deepest, most difficult, and dangerous rescues ever attempted. There were numerous SAM sites and more than adequate AAA around Yen Bai, one of North Vietnam’s most important airfields. And of all places, Roger Locher was only five miles off the south end of the runway. The ground fire was so intense the rescue effort had to be aborted, and Udorn was quiet that night. We knew Roger was alive. We knew that he had valiantly evaded the enemy for over three weeks. And now we could not get him out. We had failed, and what was worse, the North Vietnamese had been alerted. They knew Roger was in their jungle, and now they knew where to find him.

Back at Udorn we were frustrated and discouraged. The next morning, Gen John Vogt, the four-star commander of Air Forces in Vietnam/Thailand, in an uncommon act of courageous leadership, canceled the entire strike mission to Hanoi and dedicated over 100 aircraft to the rescue of Roger Locher. Capt Ron Smith, as Sandy One, was the low-altitude, on-scene commander; and a 27-year-old captain named Dale Stovall commanded Jolly 30, the lead chopper that snatched Locher from the jungle as the enemy closed in.

In a brilliant display of total commitment and unparalleled excellence, a bitter defeat became a sweet, sweet victory. On that morning, the training, teamwork, discipline,

and the dedication of hundreds of Americans and allies resulted in the successful return of Capt Roger Locher to friendly territory. During Locher’s debriefing it was learned that, unfortunately, Bob Lodge did not make it out of the airplane. His remains were returned to the United States by the North Vietnamese government some years later.

On learning the good news, General Vogt flew from Saigon to Udorn in time to be the first among hundreds of us to welcome Roger back as he stepped off the rescue helicopter after 23 days in the jungles of North Vietnam. It was an experience as moving as it was magnificent.

The flight surgeons rushed Locher off to the hospital but later agreed that he could come to the officers’ club that night at 1900 hours for 30 minutes. The word spread and the club was packed. On time, washed, shaven, fed, and in his “party suit,” Roger walked through the front door to applause that went on for 20 minutes. Hands were shaken. Tears were shed. The camaraderie and love that bound us together in time of war had come together that morning. Enormous resources and many lives had been risked.

Vince Lombardi used to tell his players, “Unless you believe in yourself and put everything you have into your pursuits—your mind, your body, your total dedication—what is life worth? The quality of life is in direct proportion to your commitment to excellence, no matter what your field of endeavor.” The commitment to excellence, the total dedication, and the belief that we could succeed are what enabled us to rescue Roger Locher. And these are the same essential elements, the intrinsic ingredients, the keys that go into the success of anything we do in life.

Retired Air Force general Jim Mullins wrote that “we must not shrink from the pursuit of excellence and quality, because our very survival depends on it.” Adm Hyman Rickover, speaking on this subject, said, “Survival for America requires the revival of excellence. Internal mediocrity can destroy us just as surely as anything external.”

The laws of success that govern our society—that keep America strong—are the same laws that care for and nurture our families, our businesses, and our spiritual and intellectual endeavors. If we are going to be the best that we can be, if we are going to realize our most profound dreams, we must be willing to be different in our quest for excellence, because it is a moving target that requires constant sight adjustment. Conformity and satisfaction with mediocrity kill the conscience and “deadens the soul of man.”

The spirit of the fighter pilot embodied in the “Top Gun” theme—and so important to the rescue of Roger Locher—is a spirit that is in no way limited to fighter pilots. It is a state of mind, a dedication to superior performance, achievement of a mission, excellence in a cause. Nothing less is acceptable if you want to do your very best, and if you want to be all that you can be.

We have to make a choice. We can be meaningful, productive, creative, positive contributors to our professions or

vocations; or we can just go along for the ride, remain average, and be content to stagnate.

The first group of people is filled with creative discontent—they are people who want more out of life than the standard offering and are not afraid to raise the standards of excellence and to work for it harder. The second group is filled with people who figured out early on that they could get by—hack the program—by doing less than their best, satisfied with “good enough.” What both groups have in common is the total freedom to choose. Born in the ghetto, or on Nob Hill, it makes no difference. Abraham Lincoln showed us that presidents can come from log cabins. The power of the mind is increased and finds its own reward when it is engaged and acted upon.

Leo Rosten wrote, “I cannot believe that the purpose of life is merely to be happy. I think the purpose of life is to be useful, to be responsible, to be honorable, to be compassionate. It is, above all, to matter, to count, to stand for something, to have it make some difference that you lived at all.” If we are going to make a difference, we are going to have to be different, and that is not easy. We have to decide if we have what it takes—as individuals, as flights, squadrons, wings, companies, schools, and organizations—to stand tall, to be counted, to be proud, to achieve, to be better than our competition.

If we become big through the success of our efforts, that’s okay—it’s the way it should be. We deserve to be big if we produce better products at better prices, provide better services, and are devoted to the pursuit of excellence. And despite the critics of the 1960s and the lingering voices that remain, there is nothing wrong with being big. Big joined Small in building America, and as long as Big remains socially conscious, Big will help provide for America’s future. Big in this regard is really a badge of excellence.

Having had the good fortune to be involved in a wide variety of activities, civilian, military, and government—I am convinced that in most endeavors excellence cannot prevail without the right kind of leadership and inspiration. As General Patton said, “We win wars with people.” General Patton won battles with people because he inspired them to win and led them to victory. A mediocre leader with the same people would have been less successful in battle, and a bad leader would have been defeated. I believe that people can and will reach for the stars when motivated by inspired leadership.

I have been more than fortunate to have worked for people like Carl Miller, Gordon Blood, Jerry O’Malley, Charlie Gabriel, and Jack Vessey. Today Carl Miller is the national administrator of the Civil Air Patrol; Gordon Blood was commander of the USAF Tactical Fighter Weapons Center; Jerry O’Malley was commander of the Tactical Air Command before his tragic and untimely death in an aircraft accident; Charlie Gabriel was chief of staff of the Air Force; and Jack Vessey rose from an enlisted man to become chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the top military position in the world.

Why were these men so successful? Because they understood people. They knew exactly what Patton was talking

about. War is won with people, and the ability to inspire in others a desire for excellence and passion for achievement is the key to successful leadership. Personally, I would have died for any one of these men—these great leaders. And I was not alone. My colleagues would have died for them, too, and some of them did.

Again the question is why? The answer is because we admired them. We respected them. We were devoted to them. We loved them. Never, ever, would we have done anything to disappoint them. Our loyalty was absolute, and what is more, that loyalty cut both ways. We knew how much they depended on us to help them achieve their missions. We knew that they genuinely cared about our needs, our hopes, and our dreams. We knew that we could count on them for support, for help when the chips were down, because they understood the real meaning of both leadership and followership.

Unfortunately, so many people in leadership and management positions, in all walks of life and particularly in the military, try to rule through a warped principle I call *negative discipline*. Followers of this principle believe motivation is sparked by threat, fear, and intimidation. This principle is engaged by little minds that dare not stretch themselves through love, loyalty, caring, support, and encouragement. Negative discipline never has worked, and it never will. Under the shadow of negative discipline, people react rather than proact. They run for shelter and hide from progress rather than stick their necks out and march forward. This is the antithesis of leadership excellence and quality.

On the other hand, great leaders know the tremendous power of positive discipline, that which inspires and instills a desire to achieve, to win, to be the best one can be. Positive discipline does require sacrifice, but sacrifice is the willing result as subordinates, inspired by their leader, self-impose the highest standards in their professional lives.

Bill Danforth, the founder of Ralston Purina, always challenged the people in his company to “stand tall, to think tall, to smile tall, and to live tall.” It is this understanding of what motivates people toward positive behavior that makes the difference between a great organization and a mediocre—or failing—organization.

J. W. Marriott, founder of one of the finest and most successful hotel companies in the world, had a very simple philosophy: “We take care of our people, and they take care of our guests.”

These two men echo the philosophy of George Patton, Carl Miller, Gordon Blood, Jerry O’Malley, Charlie Gabriel, Jack Vessey, Vince Lombardi, and all great leaders who know how to inspire people to achieve and excel. These people hold the key to the power of inspired attitude—the attitude that is so great it has literally raised nations—the attitude that is so simple it can be mastered by children. And what is it? Simply put, it is incentive and reward, good examples, mutual respect, shared beliefs, symbiotic loyalty,

and bottom-line values. Separately these components are powerful enough, but collectively they work miracles.

The greatest miracle of all is that they are infectious. There is no other feeling as great as the feeling of accomplishment, of doing something worthwhile, of being productive, of turning defeat into victory.

In the score for “Vagabond King,” Rudolph Friml wrote, “Give me some men, stout-hearted men, and I’ll soon give you ten thousand more.” John Vogt gave the inspired order to rescue Roger Locher to “a few stout-hearted leaders,” and soon there were hundreds who took leadership into their own hands, accomplished the mission, and rejoiced in its success.

At the opening of the Atlanta Marriott Marquis, widely regarded as one of the great architectural and engineering achievements in the world, the designer, John Portman Jr., noted that each speaker on the program had been preceded by a musical selection. He supposed that the “Impossible Dream,” which was played as he came forward to speak, was an appropriate choice because he had always been told:

“You can’t do this. You can’t do that. There’s no way. It’s never been done. It won’t work.” He said,

I guess the good Lord made me dumb enough not to believe in the possibility of failure, and dumb enough not to think in negative terms, and dumb enough to believe that it takes noble thoughts to produce noble deeds—yes, dumb enough to have faith, and believe that it can be done. We believe in what we do, and we seek excellence in everything we do. This hotel is about people, life-style, and hopefully it is a contribution to a feeling of human enhancement and well-being. This hotel is not elitist. It recognizes all people and their innate desires. It hopefully appeals to all of us, from the chairman of the board of the largest corporation to the most humble among us—for we are all part of the human family. This, I hope, responds to my desire of bringing people together in harmony and happiness.

Great leaders can make us feel like the author who wrote, “I love you not only for what you are, but for what I am when I am with you.” They not only set marvelous examples for us to follow if we should want to, they inspire us to want to and to set our own examples of excellence for others to follow. Strong leadership inspires strong leadership.