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Zero-Defect Leaders: No Second Chance?

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*Pervasive zero-defect mentality; it is
a cancer that is eating us all*

—General James L. Jones, Jr.¹

IN THE AGE of the so-called zero-defect military, senior officers increasingly recognize that pursuing perfection in officer performance hurts the military services. In an address to the U.S. Army Command and General Staff Officer's Course in 2001, Commandant of the Marine Corps General James L. Jones, Jr., stated, "Today, standards are incredibly high. . . . I never would have made it past major if I had been held to the same standard as you."² Vice Chief of Staff of the Army General John M. Keane recently sent a letter to senior commanders in the field concerning junior officer retention, which said in part, "We hear from . . . captains that they are frustrated by what they perceive as a 'zero-defect' mentality and a resulting culture of micro-management. They came into the Army to lead soldiers and to willingly shoulder the immense responsibility that goes with command; however, they tell us that this responsibility has been taken away from them by leaders more concerned with making sure nothing goes wrong on their watch."³

While today's military leaders recognize the symptoms of the zero-defect cancer, they must look back in history to find the cure. Four prominent leaders from the past were actors in incidents that would have ended their careers today or at least prevented promotions, but each worked for superiors who understood them and allowed them to recover from their mistakes. Perhaps the real heroes are the four illustrious officers' bosses: Rear Admiral U.R. Harris, Brigadier General Charles Heywood, Major General William R. Smith, and General Ewing E. Booth, who mentored their officers and did not destroy their careers when they made mistakes.

Fleet Admiral Chester W. Nimitz, U.S. Navy. As a 22-year old ensign, Nimitz took command of the USS *Decatur*, the first destroyer commissioned in the U.S. Navy. For someone so young to be given

a destroyer command was unusual. Nimitz's contemporaries, future admirals Raymond A. Spruance, Bill Halsey, and Ernest King, commanded destroyers when they were between the ages of 26 and 36.⁴ Harris recognized Nimitz's competence as a naval officer and entrusted him with an early destroyer command.

On 7 July 1908, when the *Decatur* entered Batangas Harbor in the Philippines, Nimitz carelessly estimated the *Decatur's* position instead of taking his bearings and failed to check the tide's direction. The *Decatur* ran aground on a mud bank, and a small steamboat rescued it the next day. Nimitz reported the incident in detail to the Navy and assumed full responsibility. The Navy court-martialed him on a reduced charge because of his spotless record and the poor condition of the Batangas Harbor charts. The Navy court-martial board found Nimitz guilty of "neglect of duty" and gave him a public reprimand. Two weeks later, Nimitz was relieved of command of the *Decatur*.⁵

Eighteen months later, a Navy selection board promoted Nimitz to lieutenant, advancing him beyond the next immediate rank of lieutenant junior grade. Thirty-three years later, in December 1941, Nimitz became Commander in Chief, Pacific Fleet and Pacific Ocean Areas, where he served throughout World War II. In 1944, he was advanced to the newly created rank of Fleet Admiral, and on 2 September 1945 aboard the battleship USS *Missouri* in Tokyo Bay, Nimitz was the U.S. signatory to Japan's surrender terms. Thirty-seven years after the incident, Nimitz became Chief of Naval Operations.

Commandant John A. Lejeune, U.S. Marine Corps. Lejeune's first sea assignment was on the USS *Bennington* in 1891. One of 10 officers on the ship and the only Marine officer, he commanded 28 Marines out of a crew of 192. Lejeune was bored by his less-than-demanding duties in the South Atlantic, but his commanding officer, Royal B.

Bradford, captain of the *Bennington*, thought Lejeune was a poor performer. On Lejeune's first fitness report, Bradford evaluated Lejeune as "good in professional ability and general conduct . . . excellent in sobriety and health [but] not good in attention to duty and efficiency of the men under his command."⁶

Bradford explained his substandard evaluation of Lejeune in the remarks block of the fitness report: "The men under this officer [Lejeune] are not trustworthy as sentries and are not tidy and soldierly in appearance. The officer is apparently too indolent and lacking in zeal; he does not give the personal attention to his men that he should; the result is a want of efficiency in the guard."⁷ Even when Lejeune received a second poor fitness report from Bradford, he did not appeal.

Commandant of the Marine Corps Brigadier General Charles Heywood counseled Lejeune sternly in a letter: "[These reports have] greatly disappointed me both as regards to you and the fact that the Corps has been so poorly represented on board the *Bennington*, and your record as an officer will be greatly affected unless you pay closer attention to your duties."⁸

Lejeune received two more mediocre evaluations from Bradford, although his performance had apparently improved somewhat: he was rated "tolerable" instead of "not good" and received no more correspondence from Heywood. After 1894, while he was stationed at the Marine Barracks in Norfolk, Virginia, Lejeune's fitness reports improved considerably.⁹

Despite his poor fitness reports, Lejeune was promoted to first lieutenant while on the *Bennington*. Twenty-five years later, as a major general, Lejeune commanded the 4th Marine Brigade in France during World War I. Later that year, General John J. Pershing appointed Lejeune commander of the 2d Infantry Division. Twenty-seven years after his poor officer evaluations on the *Bennington*, Lejeune became Commandant of the Marine Corps, a position he held for 9 years.

General George S. Patton, Jr., U.S. Army. In 1926, Patton was the operations officer of the Hawaiian Division, later the 24th and 25th Infantry Divisions. Although he held the rank of colonel during World War I, Patton had been demoted to major in

the postwar Army. Patton was unpopular with the division staff and brigade commanders because he consistently wrote papers and after-action reports that admonished subordinate commanders and units and described them as incompetent. Major General

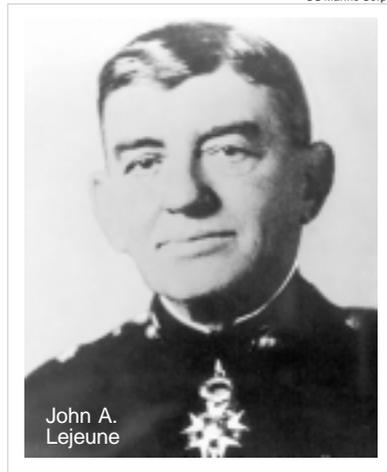
William R. Smith, the Hawaiian Division's commander, yielded to pressure from his brigade commanders and relieved Patton, saying he was "too positive in his thinking and too outspoken."¹⁰ Smith administratively reassigned Patton as the division intelligence officer, but notably, did not end his career.

In August 1943, while commanding the Seventh Army, Patton encountered two privates suffering from battle fatigue. Mistakenly believing they were cowards and malingerers because they had no visible signs of wounds,

Patton lost his temper, screamed at them, and slapped them both in the face.¹¹ Patton's superior, General Dwight D. Eisenhower, reprimanded Patton in writing, but he did not order Patton to apologize to every soldier in Seventh Army in formation, as he had originally planned. Eisenhower's letter of reprimand directed only that Patton "make in the form of apology or otherwise such personal amends to the individuals concerned as may be within [his] power."¹²

Patton went on to become a four-star general. As commander of the Third Army, he played a key role in the defeat of Nazi Germany.

General Henry H. "Hap" Arnold, U.S. Army Air Forces. In January 1917, when Arnold was the supply officer at the Signal Corps Aviation School in San Diego, two pilots disappeared during a training flight. The base commander, Colonel W.A. Glassford, did not approve the dispatch of a search party until 6 days later. Three days after that, searchers found the pilots alive, but in poor condition. Arnold and the school's training officer, Captain H.A. Dargue, demanded an army investigation into the delay in dispatching the search party and testified against their senior officers. Glassford immediately transferred Dargue and Arnold to non-Army Air Corps jobs.¹³ When Arnold arrived at his new duty station, his commander, General Clarence Edwards, greeted him and then referred to Arnold's most recent evaluation report: "It's so rotten, it makes you stink."¹⁴



In February 1926, while stationed at the Air Service Headquarters in Washington, D.C., Arnold publicly petitioned congressmen for a separate air force and drew news media attention. After Brigadier General Billy Mitchell's December 1925 court-martial for unauthorized remarks about airpower, the General Staff forbade young officers to lobby for a separate air force publicly. Major General Mason M. Patrick, Chief of the Army Air Corps, accused Arnold of attempting to "influence legislation in a manner forbidden by regulations and otherwise decidedly objectionable."¹⁵ Patrick offered Arnold a choice—resign or face a court-martial. Arnold chose the court-martial. He had good reason; he was to be court-martialed for something Patrick had once asked him to do. Two years earlier, Patrick had asked Arnold to influence a California congressman to vote in favor of a bill the Air Service wanted passed into law. Patrick chose not to request Arnold's court-martial. He reassigned Arnold to Fort Riley—but not before holding a press conference and denouncing Arnold publicly. Arnold left Washington, D.C., in disgrace.¹⁶

Arnold prepared for a tepid reception at Fort Riley, but General Ewing E. Booth, the post commander, who had been a member of the board at Mitchell's court-martial, welcomed Arnold: "Arnold, I'm glad to see you. I'm proud to have you in this command. I know why you're here, my boy. And as long as you're here, you can write and say any damned thing you want. All I ask is that you let me see it first."¹⁷

Twelve years later, Arnold became Chief of the Army Air Corps, thus taking over Patrick's former job. Arnold retired in 1945 as Commander of the Army Air Forces. In 1949, President Harry S. Truman appointed Arnold the first (and still the only) permanent five-star general of the Air Force.¹⁸

The Zero-Defect Military and Fitness Reports

In today's military, Nimitz, Lejeune, Patton, and Arnold would probably not have attained flag officer rank because the U.S. military has no room at the top for officers found guilty at a court-martial, re-

lieved from duty, or having derogatory evaluation reports. But should there be? How many of us would select an officer to captain a ship when he had already run one aground? We might hire an officer with derogatory evaluation reports or even one who was relieved, but would we offer him a command? What would happen today if a general officer slapped a soldier? The services' tolerance for errors is much smaller today than 60 years ago. Nevertheless, the leadership and tolerance that mentors Harris, Heywood, Smith, and Booth showed to Nimitz, Lejeune, Patton, and Arnold should still apply today.

Today's zero-defect military is based on the officer fitness or Officer Evaluation Report. A poor evaluation on the report is a fatal blow to an officer's career. Many officers do not even try to recover from a poor evaluation, so good officers are lost

to corporate America because no one took the time to coach, teach, and mentor them properly. Many officers believe that one mediocre rating—much less a derogatory one—will end their careers. So, instead of working together, they compete with each other to curry favor from their superiors. Unlike with Lejeune or Arnold, when today's officer receives a mediocre or derogatory evaluation, he immediately begins to plan for a career other than military service. He gives little thought to redeeming himself because he thinks trying to do so is pointless.

Senior officers in all services are concerned about the adverse effects of the zero-defect mentality. Each service recently changed its evaluation reporting system for the same reason: the zero-defect mentality had corrupted the system. The services' goals are to eliminate severe competition among junior officers and to encourage them to apply themselves to learning their jobs instead of constantly competing with their peers.

After 1997, the Army began removing second lieutenants' evaluation reports from their official military personnel files when they attained the rank of captain.¹⁹ Historically, 95 percent of lieutenants become captains. Removing earlier reports means an officer's first few evaluation reports are not a fac-



Henry H. Arnold, circa 1918

US Centennial of Flight Commission

Colonel George S. Patton, Jr., during World War I. Patton reverted to his regular rank of major in the postwar Army and was relieved of a divisional staff position after writing papers and after-action reports that strongly admonished subordinate commanders and units he found incompetent.



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tor in future promotions. The lieutenant is free to focus on learning his job instead of vying for the top block within the battalion.

In 1988, the Air Force attempted to change its reputation as the “one-mistake Air Force” by redesigning its evaluation system. The Air Force measures officers on six standards with each officer either meeting or not meeting the standard.²⁰ An officer’s senior rater completes a separate promotion recommendation form and forwards it to a central selection board with his recommendation of a promotion category of “Definitely Promote,” “Promote,” or “Do Not Promote.” The “Definitely Promote” category has a fixed number of openings for officers at the rank of major and above. Junior officers do not compete against each other for “Definitely Promote” rankings.²¹

Navy regulations forbid the numerical ranking of peers on all evaluation reports, either direct or implied.²² Instead, raters rank officers as “Early Promote,” “Must Promote,” “Promotable,” “Progressing,” or “Significant Problems.” Limits exist on how many officers the Navy can place in the top category.²³ In 1998, the Navy decided that ensigns and lieutenants junior grade would not be rated higher than “Promotable,” saying, “Forced ranking of junior officers has been a major concern voiced by senior officers. . . . With the current ranking scheme,

a mark of Promotable is perceived as disenfranchising junior officers, thereby shifting their focus from earning warfare qualifications to competing with peers. [E]arly competition in the initial period of officer development is counterproductive and not in the Navy’s best interest, particularly for officers who have not reached their minimum service obligation.”²⁴

The Marine Corps has changed its system as well, allowing one rater to numerically rank all officers in the same grade under his supervision. Now, the rater ranks each officer against all others of the same grade that he has rated in his career. The rater is not allowed to restart his profile and must keep the same rating standards, which reduces cutthroat competition among officers within the same command.²⁵

In 1999 and 2000, four Navy amphibious ships, the *USS Underwood*, *Shreveport*, *Oak Hill*, and *LaMoure County*, ran aground. Two commanders were relieved, one “disciplined,” and one remained in command and continued his mission.²⁶ Will their supervisors remember that Nimitz once also ran a ship aground? Will the Navy promote any of the four to the next rank? How many will attend the War College? Only time will tell.

Officers’ supervisors can determine the future course of their careers. The Air Force aptly defines rating supervisors as “those who know the officer

best.²⁷ Procedures are in place in all services to ensure that the leader who knows the officer best is the one who counsels him. However, a recent survey of students at the U.S. Army Command and General Staff Officers Course showed that such counseling does not always occur.²⁸ In the end, only a senior officer's conscience determines whether or not he creates an environment in which junior officers can excel.

A Recent Example

Examples exist today of leaders who have salvaged subordinates abandoned by their chain of command. A Marine Corps company commander thought a lieutenant under his command was a superb officer even though he had been relieved of duty. The company commander decided to investigate the conditions of the lieutenant's relief and discovered that as a new, inexperienced weapons platoon commander, the lieutenant had supervised an equally inexperienced platoon sergeant who had not received proper weapons training. Their chain of command had placed the two new leaders, the lieutenant and the sergeant, in charge of a combined range, with the lieutenant as the safety officer. Because of their inexperience, an incident occurred. It was raining, and the platoon's ammunition got wet. As a result, a 60-millimeter mortar charge went off, but not the increments. The weapon fired, but the round only traveled 60 to 90 feet to a location dangerously close to the soldiers on the range. Fortunately, the round did not explode, but both the lieutenant and staff sergeant were relieved of their duties and received derogatory fitness reports.

The company commander felt that the inexperi-

enced lieutenant had been set up for failure because he had received no training. He simply did not know that if the increments were wet, they would not work. The company commander thought the new lieutenant and staff sergeant were scapegoats for superior officers in their chain of command. The company commander gained the support of the battalion commander, and they salvaged the lieutenant's career. He was selected for augmentation, promoted to captain, and became a successful company commander.

But, the story does not end there. The staff sergeant worked at the battalion headquarters for about 6 months, attended mortar and machinegun leader courses, earned honors, and was assigned to the weapons platoon in the new company commander's unit. He applied himself with a vengeance, diligently studied the company's heavy weapons systems, and soon became the battalion's weapons expert. The Marine Corps removed his derogatory fitness report from his records and promoted him to gunnery sergeant.²⁹

Is There Hope?

One hopes that the military can cure the zero-defect cancer. The services have taken a step in the right direction by changing their evaluation systems to protect new junior officers from a zero-defect environment. Senior leaders are aware of the zero-defect mentality and are teaching officers to prevent it through lenience and tolerance. Given a choice of tolerance versus zero defects, tolerance must win because one day one of us could be supervising the next Nimitz, Lejeune, Patton, or Arnold. **MR**

NOTES

1. GEN James L. Jones, Jr., U.S. Marine Corps, speech to the U.S. Army Command and General Staff Officer's Course (CGSOC) class of 2001, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, 1 December 2000.
2. *Ibid.*
3. GEN John M. Keane, letter to senior commanders concerning junior officer retention, 2000. No further information given.
4. Dede W. Casad and Frank A. Driskill, *Chester W. Nimitz, Admiral of the Hills* (Austin, TX: Eakin Press, 1983), 75.
5. *Ibid.*, 76-79.
6. Merrill L. Bartlett, "An Era of Candor: John A. Lejeune's First Series of Bad Fitness Reports," *Marine Corps Gazette* (November 1994): 76.
7. *Ibid.*, 77.
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.*
10. Carlo D'Este, *Patton: A Genius for War* (New York: Harper Collins, 1995), 341.
11. *Ibid.*, 533-35.
12. *Ibid.*, 536.
13. Thomas M. Coffey, *Hap* (New York: The Viking Press, 1982), 4.
14. *Ibid.*, 89.
15. *Ibid.*, 5.
16. *Ibid.*, 127.
17. *Ibid.*, 128.

18. *Ibid.*, 386.
19. U.S. Department of the Army Pamphlet 623-105, *The Officer Evaluation Reporting System "In Brief"* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office [GPO], 1 October 1997), 1.
20. U.S. Air Force (AF) Pamphlet (Pam) 36-2404, *Guide to the Officer Evaluation System* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1 December 1996), 26.
21. *Ibid.*, 37.
22. Navy BUPERSINST 1610.10, *Navy Performance Evaluation and Counseling System* (2 August 1995), A-11. No further publishing information given.
23. *Ibid.*, A-12.
24. NAVADMIN 276/98, *Interim Change to Navy Performance Evaluation and Counseling System Instruction* (221546Z DEC 98). No further publishing information given.
25. U.S. Marine Corps Order P1610.7E with Erratum and Changes 1-2, *Performance Evaluation System* (1 January 1999), Appendix G. No further publishing information given.
26. Jack Dorsey, "Norfolk-Based Navy Ship Hits Reef Off Coast of Chile," *The Virginian-Pilot*, 13 September 2000.
27. AF Pam 36-2404, 26.
28. CGSOC 2001-Staff Group 4B, leadership discussion during C700, *Fundamentals of Excellence*, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, KS, September 2000.
29. Personal conversation with a Marine Corps officer, 10 January 2001.

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