

Burning Bridges While Contemplating Quitting

by
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Rant Two

Speech competition is war.

Oh, we can extol its educational value and the great socialization process. But the real appeal of competition *to the students* has always been a "safe" war where no one dies and only the ego gets seriously injured. The "playing fields of Eton" are now the Auditorium Foyer with a bored judge holding a cold cuppa.

All the events have their combat equivalents, of course. Student Congress is the Navy pounding away at something they can't see and only occasionally notice some debris in the water to prove anything's happening out there. The I.E.'s are the artillery - it's not face (in) to face, but you're still trying to hit a mark (whoever doesn't think a DI is like standing next to a mortar going off has never judged "Daddy" with a contestant three feet from your face, screaming and spitting in your face).

And debate is the infantry. They go over the top and meet the enemy directly. Think about it. It is why your debaters have an unspoken contempt for the other events. The extemper sees the tracks of the elephant. The debater meets the elephant, and he's real, and very scary. The other guys just don't have the courage to sharpen a file box and go over the top.

I've talked in the terms of war and competition with students for twenty years, but being essentially stupid I never really sat down and tried to learn from military history until this summer. Scott Bonnet, the coach at McPherson High School in the West Kansas district, extolled to me a book called *Leadership Secrets of Attila the Hun*. I bought the book that afternoon, and this season have applied it faithfully to my gigantic debate squad, which very much resembled a horde, just not a Golden Horde.

It worked very well. Our season has

been fabulous. For that, I have Scott to thank, and all my mighty warriors who generally slew instead of being slain.

But most of all, I have to give the lion's share of the credit, as all commanders must, to the non-com officers, which are the backbone of any army. Most of all, I have to thank my Master Sergeant.

For two years my Master Sergeant was sweet, quiet Melissa. No one would have thought of Melissa as a sergeant. I only saw her yell three times, but each was deeply scarring for the recipient. But she was the commanding officer on the field, no doubt. If something needed to be done, Mel did it. If there were walking wounded, she patched them up. If the tournament was disintegrating, she put it together. And if the commander (me) went down with heart problems, well, what difference did that make? Most of all, she served as our conscience, a role which no teacher can successfully assume. Then Melissa graduated, and went off to college and no doubt quickly became the Master Sergeant of her college squad. I wondered who would be my next Master Sergeant, and if there would be another, and what would I do without one?

You see, a squad without non-coms has no spirit. The Master Sergeant is the example and the cattle prod and the bearer of guilt. You cannot appoint one. The Master Sergeant must step forward and assume the role. It is not a role that most people want to take; there is no glory, people accuse you of trying to be the boss, everyone gripes to YOU and about YOU; and Master Sergeants have a sense of duty that leads them to take the blame whenever anything goes wrong, even if it was totally an Act of God or the Devil or a freshman.

I needn't have worried - shouldn't that be a teacher's wisdom? Keegan, a vertically

gifted red-head, put on the invisible stripes and stepped forward. She is a completely different leader than Melissa. There isn't a shred of nurse in her Irish bones, and fireworks with Keegan is an hourly experience. The displays range from the nuclear (the nuclearism kritik is really true!) to the pop! pop! PHHTTT! phenomenon when in the middle of working up to an explosion she realizes she's wrong. Every morning when she strides into the room, my check is the red-head's face. Are we happy today or not!

It doesn't take long before the entire 135 debaters knew who The Sarge was. You see, I started off coaching as a cocky second looey, and for most of my greatest years at Washburn Rural I was a captain, taking the troops over the top myself. But now I'm more of a major, desk bound and taking the Long View, and its scary when I find I've become a general- it means I've lost touch with the troops. I guess I'm afraid I'm more of a McClellan than a Lee to them. On occasion I also can be Custer.

But it's OK, because even when I was a captain I had to have a Master Sergeant to be successful, and from this perspective now I know them: Thea Rademacher, Jeff Pasley, Joni Huffman, David Schlosser, Christy Dobbels, Ben Messer... Two things they all have in common; I would not have survived without them, and each one has left and become a leader in their chosen fields. I wish I could say that their lives have all been smooth and happy. A couple have had failing marriages. One is a political advisor who has worked on a couple of unfortunate campaigns. But they rank among my proudest achievements, because I gave them the freedom to become leaders.

So, some advice about Master Sergeants, should be so lucky to have one.

1. Master Sergeants need strokes and

praise as much or more than anyone else in the squad. This is only fair since they take more guff than anyone else on the squad.

2. When the Master Sergeant really blows his/her/its cool, pay attention. There is a problem. The problem is most often that YOU are leaving too much responsibility to him/her. It's time to take off the pressure.

3. Unfortunately, when your view of yourself and the view of you owned by the Master Sergeant diverge, the Master Sergeant is probably correct. Ben thought I had the worst sense of humor of anyone who ever attempted a pun. Melissa mothered me without ceasing because she was certain I could be hit by a car chasing a ball across the road. Keegan is convinced I'm a half-mad bumbler who needs to be humored that I'm sane. I'd like to think all of them were wrong, but I know the truth.

4. However, the Master Sergeant is NOT you, and every once in a while he/she/it needs to be reminded that the teacher-student relationship is still very much alive and YOU have both control and most importantly, responsibility. The Master Sergeant may not grasp this, but it's up to you to make the Master Sergeant as effective as he/she/it can be, and this cannot be done from the captain's chair.

5. Critically, the Master Sergeant is not really in touch with the mood of the army. If you believe everything your non-com tells you, you're missing out on what Brutus, Cassius and rest of the assassination crew are up to these days.

6. Surround the Master Sergeant with good people. If on top of everything else you make him/her/it work with idiots, you will be lonesome soon.

7. Keep an eye out for future Master Sergeants. I've been grooming one for two years, and one of the major parts of my decision to stay or quit is based on his decision to step forward or not. That may sound petty to you, that a decision about my career partially rests on the shoulders of a seventeen year old, but without a good non-com, I really will have no reason to teach. I can still be a sage on the stage teaching philosophy, and not stabbed in the back by the assassination crew.

So here's to combat and here's to the troops, may God and the Queen preserve them. And here's to those who make it possible, in every possible way.

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