

Todd Burnett (Army Command Sergeant Major (Ret)): 21 years ago, my wife and I had just gotten to Germany, my first assignment and as a 2nd Lieutenant, and we're invited over to another Lieutenant's house for a welcome dinner along with his platoon sergeant, Sergeant First Class Todd Burnett. Their platoon had recently returned from a deployment to Bosnia in support of the NATO Implementation Force (IFOR) mission. I could tell they had uniquely formed an unbreakable bond that all platoon leaders hope they can create with their platoon sergeant.

I remember we were barbecuing chicken and the pieces were burnt on the outside, but not cooked to the bone. My wife looked at the chicken and said that she preferred hers cooked more. Burnett to a bite, looked at the rawness of the drumstick meat next to the bone, and said "I like it just fine." That was my first exposure to Burnett which told me he was either too polite to ask for more, or too tough to care about food poisoning.

Although Burnett and I never worked directly in the same command, we kept intersecting on several tours throughout our careers. In North Carolina at Fort Bragg, he was A/307th 1SG Burnett. When I was deployed with the 10th Mountain Division in 2006, he was the 20th Engineer Brigade Command Sergeant Major and visited our headquarters regularly to talk with the division engineer. Finally, when I was again stationed at Fort Bragg in 2012, and still currently, CSM (Ret) Todd Burnett works as a contractor for Booz Allen Hamilton focused on defeating Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs).

Burnett deservedly has attained legendary status with the engineer regiment. I know of no other NCO with the resume and lore that goes with it, and everything about him is true. He quickly and early advanced through the ranks, completed all Army training that he was afforded, deployed multiple times, and then fittingly found himself positioned in the most senior positions in the Army including CSM of JIEDDO, and in a career finale, the CSM of the United States Military Academy at West Point. He always has maintained extreme focus, superior physical fitness, never ceasing energy with a fearless attitude that has always been aimed at developing and caring for the Soldiers around him. "You have to care that much" he says.



Figure 1: Army's CSM Burnett consoles Army QB after the loss to Navy in the 113th Army Navy Game: http://archive.defense.gov/dodcmshare/photoessay/2012-12/hires_121208-A-AO884-

Ronald Johnson, Command Sergeant Major, Transatlantic Division, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers:

I had been stationed on Fort Drum for almost two years and was awaiting my key and developmental job as a Battalion Operations Officer or a Battalion Executive Officer and finally in March of 2010, that day arrived. I was told to report to the 3rd Brigade Special Troops Battalion to be the Operations Officer. 3rd Brigade had just returned from a tour in Afghanistan in January and many of the unit's leaders were now leaving. Luckily for me and the unit, CSM Ron Johnson stayed with the unit and provided the stability and knowledge for the battalion to rapidly reset, and prepare for an upcoming deployment in early 2011.

Quickly I assessed that Johnson was the smartest person in the room. Literally, he had “seen and done that,” and had a calming confidence that everything that we had to do, including resetting most of the battalion’s key leadership positions, turning in and refitting our battalions key equipment, onboarding over half of the battalion’s personnel that had turned over, and executing a training plan that would prepare us for combat in just over 12 months could be done. Johnson had the respect of all his peers and people just trusted his answers and the sensibility that he provided. I instantly liked him and respected him. The next 12 months proved difficult, but even in the most chaotic moments, Johnson provided answers and confidence to rally us, and in March of 2011 3rd Brigade 10th Mountain deployed to Zhari District, Kandahar Province Afghanistan.



Figure 2: Command Sergeant Major Ronald Johnson and Major Borg unfurling the 3rd Brigade Special Troops Battalion guidon, Fort Drum New York, MAR 2012.

After returning from this deployment Johnson was selected as the Joint Base Lewis McCord Garrison Command Sergeant Major, and then, just over a year later was selected as the 1st Engineer Brigade Command Sergeant Major, at Fort Leonard Wood, MO. Not too much later, he was selected for the Transatlantic Division’s Command Sergeant Major, a strategic two-star command with U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and he continues to serve there giving professional counsel to the Army civilian and uniformed Soldiers stateside and those deployed in the Middle East and Central Asia.

Harold Reynolds, Command Sergeant Major, Commander and Dean of the US Army Sergeants Major Academy: In 2003, as a platoon sergeant in B Company, 307th ENG Battalion, SFC Reynolds was forced to separate from his platoon during the deployment to Iraq Operation Iraqi Freedom 1. The platoon he trained, mentored and prepared to go to war with was tasked to support Special Forces units in preparation for planned airborne operations in Iraq. While the rest of his platoon prepared with Special Forces in Saudi Arabia, Reynolds and a handful of his platoon headquarters Soldiers deployed with the rest of the B Company to Kuwait. Instead of an ego being bruised, Reynolds accepted his mission and drove on. Days later, he would be recognized by the Division Commanding General for his prep of the sand-table used for the Combined Arms Rehearsal the day before our unit crossed the border into Iraq. No matter the mission, Reynolds delivered excellence.



Figure 3: Left: Command Sergeant Major Harold Reynolds and Right: Brigade Command Sergeant Major Smith Forward Operating Base Pasab, Kandahar Province, Afghanistan, MAR 2011.

The day after the invasion, the mission would change, and Reynolds once again united with his platoon and did phenomenal things throughout the deployment.

Returning from that deployment a year later, Reynolds was promoted and became my right hand as 1SG of B Company. I had already witnessed what type of person and leader he was and I was grateful that we were paired together. He was always supremely calm in the face of chaos, and always the voice of reason. And because of that he was very likable, trusted, a great trainer, and remains one of my very favorite people. In 2011 I was happy to see CSM Reynolds and give him a high-five in Afghanistan as our unit replaced and transitioned with his. After years of successfully leading Soldiers at the Battalion and Brigade level, the Army recognized CSM Reynold's unique skill sets and placed him as the Commander and Dean of the US Army Sergeants Major Academy, teaching and mentoring the most senior Non-Commissioned Officers we have in our Army.

Three Wise Men – Lessons from Trusted Mentors for the Army Leader
LTC Jason Borg

If given a chance to interview three very remarkable, senior and experienced Army leaders, what questions would you ask them? Would you want to know how they became the person they are, who their influencers were, and some of the stories or lessons they have learned throughout their combined 90 years of service? Would you want to know what makes them tick as a leader, and if they can reveal any secrets of their success? As a fellow Army leader, and a student of organizational leadership, I did.

I recently had the privilege of interviewing two current and one recently retired Command Sergeant Majors, all three highly successful, and very senior leaders for our Army. They have left such an impression on me, from the time I first met them, and it continues to impress me, watching them advance to the very top of our Army's leadership. They continue to grow, develop, and mentor the people around them inspiring me to ask them for some explanation or blueprint for their success.

The Building Blocks

Many leaders are innately gifted with the charisma, and equipped with essential tools to lead people. Most aren't as lucky but through training and experience develop a path to become leaders.

I questioned these leaders on life before the Army curious if they oozed of leadership and if they knew that they were destined to be *"All that they can be"* when they first enlisted in the Arm? What lessons did they learn as a youth that they carried with them and attributed to their successes?

When I asked CSM Reynolds how he started his progression he replied, *"with humble beginnings"*. Reynolds grew up in Clarks Grove, MN., a small farm town, population 350, where he usually told people *"I'm from Albert Lea,"* the next largest town 10 miles away, *"because people can find that town on the map."* He described *"the closest family of color was probably 10 miles away which happened to be my cousin."* He laughs. *"But I will tell you, growing up I didn't know any different I was just a kid from Clarks Grove. Not Hispanic, not white, not Asian, not nothing, just a kid from Clarks Grove who played baseball and got along with everybody."*

Similarly, Ron Johnson grew up in a small town in Indiana. *"The family wasn't well off but we also weren't hungry. Just an average small town American family. I had a paper route, I cut grass for money. I remember my grandma's house was one of the yards I always cut. It was on the other side of town. But yet I could ride my bicycle and steer with one hand and pull the lawnmower with the other hand to get to the other side of town to cut my grandma grass."*

Coincidentally I learned that all three, Hal Reynolds, Ron Johnson and Todd Burnett all grew up in small towns. Burnett from a small town in Ohio, Johnson from a small town in Indiana and

Reynolds, from a small town in Minnesota. All three came into the Army searching for opportunity and a start for something better. Probably not that different of a reason than any of the rest of us. But it may add light that good leaders and great leaders can come from anywhere. The more I talked to them, the more I realized, it is not so much the where you come from, or the why you joined that brings success. What is critically important is the who you are as a person, your work ethic, your desire to succeed, and your want to help others.

All three believed in having a hard work ethic. Young Hal was very active in sports. *"I wanted to play on the football team. But because my mother worked and dad worked and I lived 10 miles from this town, she told me: "if this is what you want to do you have to figure it out.""* He continues. *"And so I did. I made sure I had good tire pressure on my bike and I rode the 10 miles for the two-a-day [practices]. But for me early on Reynolds, if I was to go back and talk to him that will serve you well, because you took a problem you took something that you wanted to do and you figured it out in the most expeditious manner that you could based on the resources that you had available, which fast forward to today, that is pretty much what I do now."* Ending with a chuckle.

Soldier First.

We all have pains and hard lessons and so I asked Johnson about hard early lessons, or people that helped develop him and what he learned. He explained the importance of adaptability and the idea that being a Soldier first is all important as leader. He believes that there is no *"24-month Soldier."* You are always a Soldier first, and not just for the first two years of your career. In this way, you understand how to do the corps of your job and you understand what it takes to take care of the Soldiers under you.

"Up until I went to Germany, it was all construction and then I got to Germany and I was a Staff Sergeant (SSG). It didn't matter if I was a SSG for one month, which I was or, if I was a SSG for ten years, the expectations were SSG. In Germany in the 94th (Engineer Battalion) there was still construction but in a combat context. The 94th was a lot more focused on the tactical. It was a shock to me and I sucked for about the first year. First Sergeant (1SG) rode my behind non-stop. He rode me hard and I hated it. I had to adjust...I was out of my comfort zone...Then he started to come around and treat me different and I had to reflect and the reason he was treating me different was that I had finally came into the role...That was that first year when it was really rough. He whooped me into shape. Because the first five to six years it was all construction...It was really [1SG] Fitzgerald in Germany whooping me into shape. Helping me realize it's just another step, right. I am," he slowed and emphasized, *"a Soldier first, I need to learn how to operate in austere environments and then I can build something when I get there."*

Great minds must think alike. I asked Reynolds, what advice he would give privates or young sergeants who aim to be a future Command Sergeant Major. Reynolds believes it also begins with Soldiering. *"You have got to be dedicated and committed to the Army mission...If you do these things well, you will progress."* Then he goes on to discuss what he uses for in-briefings

and counseling new Soldiers referring to it as the “nuclear triangle.” He describes it, “and within the triangle there are smaller triangles with things like APFT (physical fitness), height and weight, counseling.... the point is the Army in some peoples’ eyes is really easy...but when you look at all the different things that you have to do as a Soldier and a leader, it really is tough. So to the young private, you are going to have to do a lot of balance and prioritizing for you specifically, for where you want to be. You have to do the Soldier things right first, and then the leadership stuff will come because you understand how the Soldier will work and what it is that they need to better themselves. Because once you put those stripes on it is all about the Soldier and has nothing to do with you anymore.”

Be Authentic

I asked Johnson if he had any slogans or sayings that he carried with him throughout his career to motivate himself or others. Admittedly he told me he had to phone a friend to help him, but he did mention one. He explained that a key to his success has been remaining authentic to the person who he is, and trusting in yourself to do what is right. This is something he described as *Dancing with the one who brought you.*” In his words, “If you are trying to make a decision and you’re going into a situation where you are not quite sure of how to carry yourself or how to act...you just got to remember that you are the sum result of all your experiences. And who you are got you to this point so keep being you are...You can’t teach an old dog new tricks...You know it’s worked for you.”

This advice of being who you are is also echoed by Burnett. He remarks that some people feel forced to do what they don’t want, but shouldn’t. He remembers “when I was at West Point, I was shocked when a couple of guys got their branch and I remarked you don’t look very happy, you branched Infantry? And they said I don’t really want to do it but that is the big thing. And I told them no. That is not the big thing. I said do what you want otherwise you aren’t going to be happy. And it’s going to impact people”. Johnson’s, and Burnett’s remarks serves as a powerful message that being authentic not only means being able to trust yourself to do the right thing, but if we aren’t authentic and true to who we are, then that ultimately affects everyone around us.

Taking Care of People.

Ultimately, leadership is about taking care of people, and inspiring them, helping them to become better. Burnett, Reynolds and Johnson live by this rule and I believe it is the essence of what makes them so inspirational and good at being leaders. You cannot succeed in the Army without a want and desire to care for others.

Early one morning at his first duty station in Fort Bragg, young PFC Reynolds was driving into work and got a flat tire. Knowing that he had no other option, he ran the rest of the way into work and reported to his squad leader, dripping with sweat and fear for being late. What he believed was going to be a reprimand turned into something entirely different and gave him a powerful lesson that the being in the Army, is about taking care of each other. Reynolds

reflects *“So I run to work and get to work and let my squad leader know and he can obviously see me sweating and everything. He asks me to just stay here and I’m thinking I’m about to get the smoking of my life and I’m mentally preparing myself. He comes back 5 min later and hands me an envelope. The envelope contains some money that he collected from the squad to help me gas to put in the vehicle that would get me through the rest of the week until we got to payday. And so that lesson again [in the Army] is that it really is more of a family than it is a job. And everybody really does care for you.”*

The Army’s Leadership often hands out coins to give to Soldiers to instantly recognize appreciation or high performance. Some of these are elaborate and have designs and logos and campaigns and history on them. They are a great tool to for recognition and reward and the longer you are in the Army, the greater collection of these coins you will get. My favorite coin, and probably the most unique is one that I received from Burnett. It is smaller than a quarter and in the shape of Command Sergeant Major rank. On the back of the coin it reads *“you have to care that much”*. It is a saying that Burnett has used and continues to use to this day. He now adds to it the phrase, *“Leadership matters”*. I asked him what the meaning of it was.



“I think caring that much means putting yourself out there and your vulnerable to the things that have impacted you...By showing people you care that much, people will perform at such a higher standard...You make yourself night, day, anytime somebody is having a problem, you care that much, they’re just going to do that much and elevate their performance.”

He goes on to discuss why leadership matters. *“The word leadership I have come to the reality it is so abused because people say that they are a great leader. But what are you doing to show you are a leader. Because to me I know what it means...But leadership means engulfing yourself into something and trying for something higher and giving back...It’s not about you. It’s about somebody else...If we always remember people matter because nothing is successful without the people around you.”*

Final Words of Wisdom

CSM Johnson – *“Do every job the best you can. Everything happens for a reason.”*

CSM Reynolds – *“Look at your rater’s (supervisor) support form. It will allow you to understand their vision and initiates conversation and dialog on how to get there.”*

CSM (Ret) Burnett – *“Worry about the position you are in and the next position will come. Focus on what you are doing and everything else will come.”*

I had the honor, distinct privilege and opportunity to interview and reconnect with three extraordinary people that left lasting impressions on me through the way they carry themselves, their unshakeable confidence, and awe inspiring leadership. They are what I would consider trusted mentors. All totaled, these three have a combined 90 years of Army filled with leadership experience and my hope was to capture some golden nuggets, key thoughts, stories, and philosophies that have helped them develop into the leaders that they are. Not only would I get a chance to reconnect with people I love, perhaps learn some tools for success, but I hope any of the lessons from the interviews can benefit a much broader Army and leadership driven audience. You can see more and watch the interviews in their entirety at:

- RON JOHNSON: <https://youtu.be/CKDfzYrTsrs>
- TODD BURNETT: <https://youtu.be/LlxWge0StvA>
- HAL REYNOLDS: <https://youtu.be/TG9uk---2sg8K>

