



Gen. Ridgway's Personnel Management Policy

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By Maj. Gen. Guy S. Meloy, U.S. Army retired

As I read the September ARMY Magazine's review of what Maj. Vandergriff considered problems with the personnel management system, and on the next page a review of a biography describing Gen. Matthew Ridgway's leadership qualities, I was reminded of an interesting historical footnote passed to me by the late Gen. James M. Gavin.

Readers may recall that when Gen. Ridgway commanded the 82nd Airborne Division in World War II, Gavin, as a 36-year old colonel, initially commanded the 505th Parachute Infantry Regiment during stateside training and the airborne assaults on Sicily and Salerno. At age 37 and after being promoted to brigadier general, he was assigned as Ridgway's assistant division commander for the airborne drop on Normandy. After Ridgway was promoted to his third star, he was promoted again and assumed command of the 82nd for the remainder of the war and for the first several months after the division returned to the continental United States.

Over the years Gen. Gavin frequently visited Ft. Bragg, N.C., to attend various division functions, and as a courtesy would usually visit with the division commander. On one such visit in 1979, while I was the commander, after a few minutes of pleasantries Gavin suddenly changed the subject and started asking a series of probing questions concerning the age, professional education and professional experience of the division's chain of command: What was my background and that of the assistant division commanders? How many of the brigade commanders had attended the War College (all), how old were they, and how much service did they have? How many battalion commanders had been to Command and General Staff College (all), and what were their ages and length of service? He asked about company commanders and how many had completed their respective branch's advanced course. He wanted to know how much service our first sergeants had, and even asked about platoon sergeants and squad leaders. He seemed especially interested in officer schooling and the NCO education system and military occupational specialty qualification standards.

In short order he had a reasonably good idea of the professional experience and qualifications of the division's entire chain of command from squad leader to commanding general. As I grew more and more curious as to what prompted that line of questions, he suddenly changed the subject. "Have you ever wondered how in the world our amateur Army ever won World War II?" He then answered his own question, and while after more than 20 years the numbers that follow may not be exact, they are close. This is what he said:

"When the 82nd deployed to North Africa in 1943, Matt Ridgway and perhaps one other general were the only members of the division who had attended a war college. Only three of the colonels had attended Leavenworth, only one or two of the battalion commanders had, and as a matter of fact, many of the battalion commanders had never even attended their advanced course. The average age of the colonels was less than 40, and when we made the Normandy jump, one was still in his 20s. Most battalion commanders were in their late 20s or very early 30s. Most of the company commanders were in their early 20s, and the majority of both commissioned and noncommissioned leaders at battalion and company level had less than two years of active duty. Battalion and regimental staff officers were in their late 20s, in a few cases in their early 30s, and most of the staffs at battalion level also had less than two years service. The average age of our platoon leaders was about 20 or 21, first sergeants and platoon sergeants maybe 24 or 25, and most squad leaders were teen-agers or, at best, just out of their teens. I'd estimate that at the time we deployed overseas, between 80 and 90 percent of the division had served two years or less; more than half were still teen-agers, and most of those in the chain of command were in their 20s. And since that was probably typical of most divisions, the 82nd was not that different from other outfits.

"So how did this collection of very young and inexperienced soldiers led by equally young and inexperienced officers and NCOs manage to defeat one of the most powerful and experienced armies ever assembled? There are a number of reasons, of course, but in the case of the 82nd, one of the most important reasons was the result of Matt Ridgway's wartime personnel management policy.

"About a month before we deployed to North Africa, Ridgway assembled all the officers of the division in the

theater at Camp MacKall and made one of the shortest yet most significant 'how to win a war' speeches I ever heard."

This is how Gavin remembered what Gen. Ridgway said to his officers that day:

"We have trained hard these past few months, and during that time we have weeded out those officers who we felt could not handle combat. Those of you assembled here will be the ones we take to war. I view our individual and collective mission as defeating the enemy and winning battles -- nothing more and nothing less. As your commander, I am responsible for how best to accomplish that mission, so that's my primary interest, and it must be your primary interest as well. I will be both blunt and honest with you. I am not particularly interested in career progression or promotions -- mine or yours. I am only interested in winning this war, and at the same time giving our troops the best possible leadership they deserve. Therefore, as of this minute, each of you is frozen in your present assignment.

"Any future reassignments will be made only as absolutely required because of combat casualties, and then only vertically. If you're a platoon leader, you will remain a platoon leader unless your company commander is either killed in action or, if wounded, unable to return to duty in 30 days or more. If he can make it back within 30 days, we will hold his slot open until he returns. If he can't, then he will be replaced by either the company executive officer or one of the platoon leaders from that same company, but not by any officer from a different company. This same policy will hold for every level of command. If a battalion commander is killed or wounded, either a staff officer or one of the company commanders from his battalion -- never from a different battalion -- will assume command of the battalion.

"In other words, there will be no lateral transfers from one company to the next, even in the same battalion, from one battalion to the next even within the same regiment, or from one regiment to another. You will be a better leader if you know your men inside and out -- and they will be better soldiers if they know their leaders the same way. In the final analysis, that's what will win this war, and equally important, that's what will save lives."

Then, with a wide smile, Gavin said, "Ridgway concluded by telling us, 'There will be no questions. Please return to your duties.' As we stood to leave, someone started clapping, and with that the entire officer corps of the 82nd Airborne began to cheer and applaud."

Gavin concluded by pointing out that after working and living together as a team for so long, "By the time the division jumped into Normandy, every man in every company, regardless of rank, could identify every other man from a hundred yards away just by the way he walked. Every man knew exactly how every other man would react in any given set of circumstances, and in many cases because voices on the radio were so familiar, we even stopped using call signs. By Normandy we were a thoroughly professional organization, confident and experienced, and we knew how to fight. I attribute that to Ridgway's decision at MacKall to stabilize our leadership, and although there still were reassignments and promotions due to casualties and normal attrition, he stuck to his guns and reassigned only vertically. You cannot imagine what this did for leader -- and follower -- confidence in the chain of command."

After Gen. Gavin left my office, I could not help but reflect on the consequences of the rapid turnover in company, battalion and brigade leadership during the Vietnam War, and the extent to which so much leader on-the-job training during the first few weeks of any new commander's break-in period affected unit cohesiveness and combat effectiveness. Granted, the Army's challenges today are different from those of World War II, and given the realities of the 21st century, Ridgway's policy of vertical reassignments only may not be today's best solution. Whatever the answer, however, I suspect that both Ridgway and Gavin would argue that what has not changed and has remained the same regardless of circumstances, is the requirement for stable, seasoned leadership to develop and maintain unit cohesion and combat effectiveness.

Unfortunately, given competing personnel requirements and other priorities, it is all too easy to pay only lip service to that goal.

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