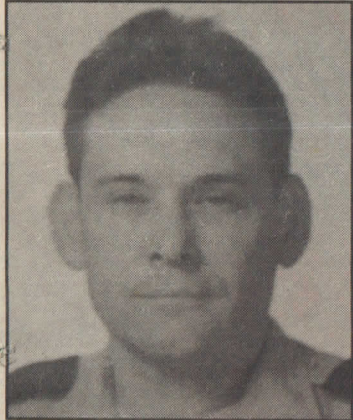


Back Talk



By Robert B. Adolph Jr.

Service gives sense of purpose

Apparently, workers work better if their company provides meaning in their lives. If this is true, then meaning is one of the single most important work issues to any human, and therefore to any soldier.

The issue of meaning goes right to the heart of why many choose to become soldiers in the first place — because service to nation is an important and honorable profession, and as such, provides meaning.

To serve honorably in the military for any period has deep meaning. The idea of service appeals to emotions and satisfies a deeply personal need of the psyche.

To me, this means that self-sacrifice and honor are not dead in American society. The success of the all-volunteer Army is proof of a heartfelt desire on the part of many Americans to find that meaning and to serve something of great worth larger than themselves.

I take issue with the pundits of the statistical sciences who say that keeping the all-volunteer force healthy is primarily a matter of pay and benefits packages. These are things that soldiers have to consider if they have families, but they are not of visceral human emotional importance.

Those who measure their worth in terms of money and benefits alone are sorry creatures who are deserving of pity. In the main, today's soldier is every bit the match of those who

have served in past U.S. wars because of the very real and continuing human capacity for self-sacrifice.

What makes the Army different from a civilian company? At its most basic, it's about meaning. Making television sets might provide a good job, but it involves little sacrifice, and though honest, few would consider it particularly honorable beyond the job's importance to family support.

This is part of what makes soldiering so special — its uniqueness and the opportunity for self-sacrifice, along with the respect accorded by fellow citizens.

Soldiering is not about money and benefits, it's about serving and the pride that comes from potentially risking life for something collectively believed in: America.

This risk is the reality, a reality constructed by irrational humans. No rational being would risk life and limb for anything beyond self-interest. This makes soldiers some of the world's greatest romantics.

Most of the soldiers I know don't just believe their jobs are important; they love their chosen profession. That love often translates into an extraordinary amount of time spent away from families. It's not that families are less important, but the needs of the nation are often interpreted as greater and seemingly more immediate.

Is it any wonder that soldiers revere their honored dead? Those who have paid the ultimate price for the ideas of America are the role models. None aspire to their deaths, but if death comes, so long as it has meaning, it is acceptable.

While honestly desirous of being part of a larger and more important whole, soldiers also need to stand out from their peers and to be recognized as special and unique in their own right. This seeming paradox is not really contradictory, but human. Soldiers are not, as some would have us believe, mechanical automatons.

The most difficult thing about soldiering is not dying. Anyone can get killed. The hardest thing about soldiering is regularly subordinating your will and judgment to superiors, regardless of your personal feelings, and then following orders that could lead to possible death. To accomplish this feat takes extraordinary strength of character and will.

What makes it possible is a firm belief in the meaning of our profession and the mutually supporting roles of superiors, peers and subordinates. There is little doubt that the greatest human legacy of military service is the meaning it gives to all of our lives.

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