



The Unpopular Man – Leading as a Lance Corporal

By CSgt Aaron Kerin R ANGLIAN



In July 2006 I attended my Potential Junior Non-Commissioned Officers' Cadre. I was still junior. Fresh faced (even, perhaps, baby-faced).

I'd arrived in the battalion only 18 months earlier, only 18 years old. But I had completed a tour of Iraq, Operation TELIC 6, and my Platoon Commander decided to send me on the cadre. It was to be the last course prior to the battalion's deployment to Helmand on Operation HERRICK 6. Knowing that if I passed this I would be a fire team commander the upcoming tour, I threw everything I had into it.

Probably the proudest day in a young soldier's career is the day that they get promoted to Lance Corporal. Your first stripe, the first step up the ladder, the first time that you have responsibility for others. Your first day when you lead as a Lance Corporal.

There are a whole number of challenges when you become a leader for the first time. Throughout my career I've found none as daunting as leading your friends only one day after you were the same rank as them.

Before I promoted I thought about what sort of JNCO I wanted to be but, to be honest, in those early days every Lance Corporal is a product of the leaders they've worked for. With only a short period of time in the Army you take what you can from the commanders that have led you.

Good Blokes, Good Bastards and Bad Bastards

Once I'd promoted to Lance Corporal I deployed on Op HERRICK 6. On my return, 7 months later, I got tasked with a Driver/Maintainer Instructors Course, a job that I didn't want to do. So I started to think ahead to the Section Commanders' Battle Course.

Some time later I received some pretty sound leadership advice from my father-in-law. He had served 22 years in the Grenadier Guards and finished as the 'Drill Bloke', so I assumed he probably knew a thing or two about leadership. 'Aaron,' he told me, 'there are two types of Non-Commissioned Officers: The good bastards and the bad bastards. You can always try to be a good bloke, but in the end one day you'll have to make the right decision, not the popular one. Then, to some people, you'll be a bastard.' It's advice I wish I'd had sooner.



I didn't really understand what he meant until slightly later on in my career. Looking back, at times I was both.

Reality of Leadership

Leading on operations is what every young Lance Corporal wants. Responsibility. Being there with motivated soldiers who know that if they don't do things properly it could lead to a life or death situation. But the big ask for a young Lance Corporal is leading day-to-day in camp. It's this time that is make-or-break for a Lance Corporal.

There are two types of Lance Corporals that I have seen.

Some don't want to grip their mates. Popularity is more important than respect. They don't want to be 'the unpopular man'. Rather than be a good bastard or a bad bastard, they'd rather be a comfortable friend. It's worse than being a bad bastard, being the leader who wants popularity more than respect.

Then there are the ones that relish the opportunity to lead. They grab the bull by the horns, they take responsibility and become role models to their subordinates. They step up and speak out when others just sit around and chunt. These Lance Corporals don't *want* to grip their mates. But let me tell you: You find out who your true friends are the first time you ask them to do something. If they really are your friends you won't need to grip them.

Throughout your time as a leader you have to make decisions that some won't like. The hardest time to do this is when you lead as a Lance Corporal. 'The unpopular man': You are the first to pass on the jobs, the front line disher-out of 'crap jobs' but also one of the lads. It's a very thin line that almost every Lance Corporal struggles to get right.

'The Unpopular Man'

On a few occasions, I got it wrong. I made some poor leadership decisions. One that I remember was when our battalion was based in Pirbright. As a new Lance Corporal, I was taking our company on area cleaning: a standard Lance Corporal task. I got gripped by the Quarter Master because a few of the blokes were messing around, horsing about as we marched to our company area. My initial reaction, still smarting from the bollocking I'd got from the QM, was to AGAI every man who'd been there. Looking back, that poor decision took a lot of time to regain from. I became the bad bastard. Not only that, but it actually resulted in me punishing myself. I spent all morning filling out AGAI forms...

If I was to go back and do everything again, would I change what I did? Probably not. Painful as it was, when you're a Lance Corporal it's not the mistakes that you make that are the issue. It's whether you learn from them or not. It's whether you make them again or not.



Be a leader

When you are a Lance Corporal you are a leader. So you have to act like one, both in camp and socially. If this means that you have to make unpopular decisions, then do it. Do it because, as long as you make them with the well-being of your soldiers in mind, your soldiers will be better for it in the future. And they will respect you for it.

Be a good bastard. Avoid being a bad bastard. But most of all don't be scared of becoming 'the unpopular man'. When you make the right decision, not the popular one, your real friends won't mind and everyone else will respect you for it.

And that's far more important if you want to properly lead as a Lance Corporal.

Questions:

1. Which parts of the article can you relate to?
2. Is it really just a choice of being one of three options – the good bastard, the bad bastard or the comfortable friend? Or can you manage a different balance?
3. Is there a JNCO or SNCO you know who is a great model of how to manage this well? What examples can you give of how they get it right? Use the leadership code to help you.
4. If you have to discipline your subordinates, how do you manage the relationship with those who are friends? What is the impact on the team of getting it wrong?
5. Is it impossible to have friends who are your subordinates? What happens if you have to choose between your friend or making the right decision?
6. What could the chain of command do to help new LCpls get the balance right?
7. Look at it from the other perspective. Who above you get the balance between friendship and leadership right? How do they manage it? Are they respected and liked? Why?



CSgt Aaron Kerin passed out of training at AFC (Harrogate) in 2004. During 15 years in the British Army he has deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan and been a team commander in a covert surveillance company. He has instructed at the Infantry Training Centre and is currently a CSgt Instructor at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst. The views and opinions expressed are his own and do not necessarily reflect the views of the British Army.

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