

## **Currahee- A Primer on Leadership**

**By**

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*Band of Brothers* is a miniseries about the exploits of the soldiers of E Company, 2/506 PIR from their initial training until the end of World War II in Europe. I assume most of you have seen *Band of Brothers*. If you have not- do so right now, we will wait.

The main character of the entire miniseries is an Army officer named Dick Winters but he is not the focus of the first episode. The first episode (entitled *Currahee*) focuses on E Company as it trains for combat and most of this training occurs under the command of Captain Herbert Sobel. Sobel displays a dizzyingly steep character arc during the episode and this arc provides valuable insight into the concept of leadership. It is possible to have a really interesting discussion of leadership by assigning two tasks.

### **Task 1: Make the case that CPT Sobel is an effective leader (in the first half of the episode).**

We first encounter Sobel during E Company's basic training at Camp Toccoa, Georgia while he is inspecting his soldiers. I have known officers whose expertise at inspection was limited to checking the alignment of belt buckles and the shine on the toes of boots. This is not the case with Sobel as we learn when he inspects one soldier's weapon. Instead of saying "You have rust on your weapon" Sobel says, "Rust on butt plate hinge spring" thus displaying a formidable (and intimidating) level of knowledge of the component parts of an Army weapon.

Sobel displays other traits that are used today as exemplars of effective leadership. Basic training at Camp Toccoa put an enormous amount of emphasis on physical fitness. One of the banes of existence for the aspiring paratroopers was the infamous run up Currahee Mountain ("*3 miles up, 3 miles down!*"). The regimental commander, COL Robert Sink (portrayed by Dale Dye) intended the 506<sup>th</sup> to be an elite unit and one of his defining criteria was physical fitness. In such a demanding atmosphere, many soldiers did not measure up. More than five thousand enlisted soldiers volunteered for airborne training with the 506<sup>th</sup> and only one-third made it through basic training and officer attrition was even higher. In this light, it is interesting that every time we see E Company soldiers running up Currahee, we see Captain Sobel running with them, easily ranging up and down the ranks, closely observing the performance of his soldiers. Today this would be characterized as role modeling behavior and it is considered an essential part of what leaders do.

As the soldiers in E Company finish their basic training, there is a scene where COL Sink recognizes Sobel's results and tells him that Sobel has trained one of the finest units he has ever seen.

**Task 2: By the end of the episode, Sobel is stripped of his command. Make the case that this action was justified.**

There is a remarkable transformation during the second half of the episode that culminates in a mutiny within E Company and the basic lesson we learn from this startling series of events is that leadership is a social contract.

During basic training, the soldiers of E Company clearly don't like their commander but he is constantly on their minds and they are constantly thinking of ways to meet his extremely high standards. This dynamic helped to make them an exemplary unit. Later on, during unit-level training in North Carolina and in England, their dislike of Sobel abruptly changed to contempt and this transformation occurred for one simple reason. It became apparent in unit-level training that Sobel was not proficient at map-reading.

Why would such a simple flaw generate such a violent reaction? Simple answer? Leadership is a social contract. At a very fundamental level, soldiers have two expectations of their unit leaders. The first is character-based and it is that their leaders should share the risk of combat. The second expectation is competency-based and it is that their leaders should know enough to minimize the risk of combat. Being hopeless at land navigation means that Sobel will get his soldiers lost on the battlefield and will, thereby, increase their chances of being killed. This one shortcoming magnifies all of Sobel's other flaws and eventually the NCOs of E Company publically refuse to serve under his command.

What makes leadership so mysterious is that there is no generally accepted set of character traits and competencies that is expected of every leader. These attributes will vary depending on the culture of societies or the nature of organizations. So, for example, no one would expect Walmart market managers to be proficient at land navigation. They are expected to display other competencies such as the ability to inspect a fresh produce section and draw valid conclusions about the nature of the leadership in that store. This insight into the characteristics of leaders is of more than academic interest. The increasingly common phenomenon in corporate America of hiring outsider CEOs demonstrates the value of this insight. People who are effective leaders in one organization cannot just parachute into another organization and be equally effective right away. This is so because the terms of the leadership social contract differ from organization to organization. Workers in corporate America might not expect their leaders to be proficient

in land navigation but even today West Point sends cadets during their summer training to wander around in the woods with nothing but a map and a compass.