

IN A TREATISE THAT IS BECOMING THE MODEL

FOR MILITARY LEADERSHIP, COL. BRYAN MCCOY INCORPORATES

PHILOSOPHY, PSYCHOLOGY AND PHYSIOLOGY INTO FUNDAMENTAL

TRAINING TECHNIQUES TO "INOCULATE AGAINST THE VIRUSES OF COMBAT."

John Koopman/San Francisco Chronicle



WHEN YOU LEAD MARINES INTO BATTLE

BY ANNE BARAJAS HARP

continued

Bryan McCoy, then a lieutenant colonel, checks a map on the hood of his Humvee on the morning of the invasion of Iraq in 2003.

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hen members of the U.S. 3rd Battalion, 4th Marine Regiment helped Iraqi citizens pull down the statue of former dictator Saddam Hussein in April 2003, commanding officer Col. Bryan P. McCoy stood nearby and watched with the rest of the world as his men made history.

It is, perhaps, the most iconic image of the war in Iraq. But in the end, that image may not be what McCoy, who earned his BA from OU in 1984, is remembered for. Instead, he may be known for changing the way that Marines and other soldiers prepare for the rigors of war.

McCoy is the author of *The Passion of Command: The Moral Imperative of Leadership*. At only 78 pages, the book is small in size but already large in impact.

"This is an accident," says McCoy, who visited Norman recently as the keynote speaker for the annual OU Naval ROTC Dining In banquet.

After returning from two Iraq tours of duty in 2004, McCoy was appointed to the National War College, which he calls "The Armed Forces version of higher education." There, he and 12 classmates were singled out to write papers for special credit. Though it was considered an honor, McCoy was less than thrilled.

"I was tired. I wasn't going for the gold watches," he explains. McCoy remained reluctant even after faculty members suggested he write about his leadership experiences during combat. Then a mentor who served in the Israeli War suggested he use the exercise as "combat download," a way to decompress his wartime encounters.

During the next several evenings, McCoy discovered that the 30-page assignment had evolved into a 90-page, "stream of consciousness," writing blitz.

The resulting paper was passed from person to person as it made its way around the War College faculty and was e-mailed among members of the Marine Corps.

"It kind of got legs of its own," McCoy says. Later, he was approached by retired USMC senior officers, who wanted to turn the paper into a book. McCoy agreed, but only if proceeds would benefit the Semper Fi Foundation for injured Marines.

In just two years, *The Passion of Command* has become something of a military sensation. The book now is required reading at The Basic School at Quantico, Virginia, where all new Marine officers train, and is being used by the Israeli Defense Force, the Australian army and Canada Command, the Canadian version of U.S. Joint Forces. McCoy arrived in Norman fresh from a four-day training session for lead officers with Norway's central military command.

He acknowledges that the primary idea behind his book—how to prepare a combat arms unit for war at the battalion level—is nothing new. But what is new is how McCoy and his men approached that preparation.

"Every unit goes out, and they practice the fundamentals. We took it a step further," he says. Incorporating careful study of philosophy, psychology and physiology, McCoy and his officers at the USMC Air Ground Combat Center at Twenty-Nine Palms, California, worked to understand and master the human factors of battle.

The goal, McCoy writes, was to "inoculate against the viruses of combat," which include fatigue, stress, fear and surprise. That inoculation sometimes took unusual forms. McCoy's soldiers spent nights at a Los Angeles trauma unit to immerse themselves in a crisis situation, observe how doctors handled trauma and to become accustomed to the sight of blood.



Michael Macor/San Francisco Chronicle

Theories developed by Col. Bryan P. McCoy through battlefield experiences and intensive training are the foundation of his book on military leadership that has become required reading for U.S. Marine officers, as well as those of several other countries.



“Selfless leadership is the difference between appointed and anointed; you’re appointed to command, not anointed.”

BY JENNIFER L. LAMAR

Meeting an OU graduate who is making a name for himself in Marine leadership was an inspiration for Naval ROTC midshipmen attending the annual spring Dining In banquet this spring. From left are Shannon Willis, Broken Bow junior; Bryan Aguilar, El Paso, Texas, sophomore; and McCoy.

Even more unusual is the fact that McCoy’s men used cognitive imaging during field training to place themselves in the realities of war. They role-played battles, injuries and even death and lived out—moment to moment—the feelings that go along with those experiences.

McCoy compares the process to the cognitive imaging skiers often do in preparation for a downhill run. Skiers can be observed actually weaving their hands as they “see” themselves taking the course before them.

“We did a lot of (cognitive imaging) for combat, too,” he says. “Imagining the death of a fellow Marine, actually conjuring up the emotions. Scientifically, you’re building synapses—bridges that will help them get through this.”

The Passion of Command also advocates a different way to imagine leadership. McCoy uses the word “passion” in the ancient Latin sense, which translates to “suffering for love.” He proposes that military commanders should model a selfless leadership that some Christian denominations refer to as “servant leadership.”

“Selfless leadership is the difference between appointed and anointed; you’re appointed to command, not anointed,” he says.

McCoy’s ideas are, quite literally, battle tested. In the book, he relates a long, brutal firefight at Al Kut, Iraq, that measured the battalion’s strength. McCoy’s men won handily, an outcome he believes was in direct proportion to his unit’s readiness.

“What gave us the edge over our enemy was an exquisite preparation of the mind and body that produced a will to fight, a will to win,” he writes. “We had performed simple, ordinary actions under extraordinary conditions, and we had triumphed.

We had inured ourselves to the sting of battle even before the first shot was fired in anger.”

Successes aside, McCoy is quick to recognize that the outcomes of battle are measured in human lives.

“We did things right, we did things wrong—we weren’t perfect by a long shot,” he says.

Perfect or not, the successes and ideas behind McCoy’s 3rd Battalion have garnered praise. In addition to the accolades coming his way from *The Passion of Command*, McCoy and his soldiers were the subject of another book, *McCoy’s Marines: Darkside to Baghdad*, by former imbedded reporter John Koopman of *The San Francisco Chronicle*. McCoy has been awarded the Legion of Merit with combat V, Bronze Star with combat V [the “V” denoting valor on the battlefield] and has been tapped to become chief of current operations for Central Command at Tampa, Florida. There he will track military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq and help keep higher-ups—including Gen. David H. Petraeus, commanding general of the Multi-National Force, Iraq—abreast of developments.

“It’s a big challenge,” he concedes, and one that many a career military man would covet. But McCoy is not among them. Instead, he is sorry that for now at least, rising through the ranks means leaving his men behind.

“Being in command of Marines is the highest privilege there is,” he says. “There isn’t anything that can come close to that kind of honor.”

Anne Barajas Harp is a freelance writer living in Norman.