

Lt., U. S. Army, Ret.

About a week before I left my regiment in Korea to rotate back to the States, I received a letter from the commanding general of the division in which I had been serving. Following is an extract from that letter:

Dear Lieutenant Ecker,

Your performance of duty in this division, according to reports reaching me, indicates that you are well worthy of consideration for integration in the Regular Army of the United States. Consequently, I am taking the liberty to bring this to your attention and to enjoin you to give the matter serious consideration, should you have not already done so.

The Army is in urgent need of young, well qualified officers – particularly those who have had the benefit and fine experience which is derived from combat and have proven their courage and qualities of leadership...

The letter went on to appeal to my patriotism and to offer his personal endorsement of my application. What he was proposing was, in fact, the only way I could have expected to make a successful career in the military service; that is, as a member of the Regular Army. My current commission was in the Army Reserve and, as such, was considered to be temporary. Certainly, that was the way I considered it. However, there were some definite career advantages in the offer the general was dangling in front of me.

I was 23 years old and had only a high school education. At the time, as an officer in the Army, I was making more money than I could possibly expect to make as a civilian—and the fringe benefits would be almost impossible to replace on the outside. In addition, I was doing well in my work...I was a good officer.

So, why didn't I accept the general's invitation? The most straightforward answer to that question can be found in my ten months as an infantry small unit commander in the war. The Officers Corps at the time was divided into three basic categories: company-grade officers, field-grade officers and general officers. The company-grade officers (lieutenants and captains) were the small unit commanders (platoons and companies). Field grade officers commanded battalions and regiments. Generals commanded the larger units. It didn't take me long as a small unit commander in Korea to figure out that the partition between company grade and field grade involved more than simply the size of the unit. I quickly discovered that the company was the largest unit in combat in which a commander could maintain a close, personal relationship with the men under his command. Field grade officers—and the generals—dealt with units, not persons. The size of their commands made this necessary, of course. However, such necessity did more than isolate "the brass" from personal contact with the men under their command. It also relieved them from the kind of thinking that would establish the welfare of those men as the highest priority in planning how they would be employed in battle situations.

During my combat tour in Korea, I was a witness to two operations in which this distinction became conspicuously clear. The first was Operation Showdown in October of 1952. Showdown was an action conceived by the generals to evict the Chinese army from Hill 598, dubbed "Triangle Hill" by the front-line GIs. There wasn't any real good tactical reason for taking the hill. The reason came mostly from the egos of the guys that were calling the shots. In fact, after the Chinese ultimately repulsed the attack—with very heavy losses on our side (1,540 casualties; 365 killed, 1,174 wounded and one captured)—the hill remained in enemy hands,

without giving them any tactical advantage, until the end of the war some nine months later. Clearly, this was a case in which “the brass” viewed the operation from the perspective of units rather than human lives.

The second operation came about some three months later, when “the brass” conceived a plan to assault a small elevation at the base of a Chinese-owned terrain complex the GIs named T-Bone Hill. The elevation was called Spud Hill and the operation was given the name Smack. In actual fact, it was nothing but a big show. As an officer assigned to the assault regiment, my job in the operation was to provide escorts for high-ranking UN brass to front-line locations overlooking the site of the operation—and to serve as an escort myself for an Air Force PR guy and his photographer as they documented the flyboys’ part in the show. Tactically, it was a relatively minor operation—at least compared to Showdown—with only 57 casualties (five killed and 52 wounded, 10 of them seriously). But, to “the brass,” those casualties were simply a part of the cost of doing business—in this case, show business.

So, these two operations were certainly on my mind as I pondered the general’s invitation. But, there was another consideration that was, in many ways, a more significant factor in my deliberations. That factor was what I called “the military mentality.” It had been my observation that advancement as an officer in the regular army required the acquisition of that mentality. Its primary attribute, as I saw it, was the complete abandonment of common sense in the interest of “the good of the corps.” It was this attribute, more than anything else, that convinced me to disregard the general’s letter and to seek my fortune—such as it was—as a civilian. I did remain in the active reserve for a few years while I was in college after the war, but I then resigned my commission and became...Lieutenant, U.S. Army, Retired.

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