

Todd Burnett (Army CSM Ret): My wife and I had just gotten to Germany, my first assignment and me a brand new 2LT, and we're invited over to another Lieutenant's house for a welcome dinner. He had also invited his platoon sergeant, SFC Todd Burnett. Their platoon had recently returned from a deployment to Bosnia in support of the NATO IFOR mission, and I could tell, they had uniquely formed an unbreakable bond with a friendship that all platoon leaders hope they can create with their platoon sergeant. I remember we were barbequing chicken, and the pieces were burnt on the outside, but not cooked to the bone. My wife looked at the chicken and said that she preferred hers cooked more. SFC Burnett took a bite, looked at the rawness of the drumstick meat next to the bone, and said "I like it just fine". That was my first exposure to SFC Burnett which told me he was either too polite to ask for more, or too tough to care about food poisoning.

Although Todd and I never worked directly in the same command, we kept intersecting on several of tours throughout our careers. In North Carolina at Fort Bragg, he was A/307th 1SG Burnett. When I was deployed with the 10th Mountain Division in 2006, he was the 20th Engineer Brigade Command Sergeant Major which he visited our headquarters regularly to talk with the Division Engineer. Later, still with the 10th Mountain Division, CSM Todd Burnett for Joint IED Defeat Organization (JIEDDO). Finally, in 2012 at Fort Bragg, and now CSM (Ret) Todd Burnett works as a contractor for Booz Allen Hamilton focused on defeating Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs).

Todd Burnett, deservedly has attained legendary status with the engineer regiment. I know of no other NCO with the resume and lore that goes with it, and everything about him is true. He quickly and early advanced through the ranks, completed all Army training that he was afforded, deployed multiple times and then fittingly found himself positioned in the most senior positions in the Army including CSM of JIEDDO, and in a career finale, the CSM of the United States Military Academy at Westpoint. He always has maintained extreme focus, superior physical fitness, never ceasing energy and a fearless attitude that has always been aimed at developing and caring for the Soldiers around him. "You have to care that much".



Figure 1: Army's CSM Burnett consoles Army QB after the loss to Navy in the 113th Army Navy Game: http://archive.defense.gov/dodcmsshare/photoessay/2012-12/hires_121208-A-AO884-

Ronald Johnson, Command Sergeant Major,

Transatlantic Division, US Army Corps of Engineers: I had been stationed on Fort Drum for almost two years and was awaiting my key and developmental job as a Battalion Operations Officer or a Battalion Executive Officer and finally that day had arrived in March of 2010. I was told to report to the 3rd Brigade Special Troops Battalion to be the Operations Officer. 3rd Brigade had just returned from a tour in Afghanistan in January and many of the unit's leaders were now leaving. Luckily for me and the unit, CSM Ron Johnson, stayed with the unit, providing the stability, and knowledge for the Battalion to rapidly reset, and prepare for an upcoming deployment in early 2011.

Quickly I assessed that Ron Johnson was the smartest person in the room. Literally, he had “seen and done that”, and had a calming confidence that everything that we had to do including, resetting most of the battalion’s key leadership positions, turning in and refitting our battalions key equipment, onboarding over half of the battalion’s personnel that had turnover, and executing a training plan that would prepare us for combat in just over 12 months could be done. CSM Johnson, had the respect of all his peers and people just trusted his answers and the sensibility that he provided. I instantly liked him and respected him. The next twelve months proved difficult, but even in the most chaotic moments, CSM Johnson provided answers and confidence to rally and in March of 2011, 3rd Brigade 10th Mountain deployed to Zhari District, Kandahar Province Afghanistan.



Figure 2: Command Sergeant Major Ronald Johnson and Major unrolling the 3rd Brigade Special Troops Battalion guidon, Fort Drum New York, MAR 2012.

After returning from this deployment CSM Johnson was selected as the Joint Base Lewis McCord Garrison Command Sergeant Major, and then just over a year later was further selected as an 1st Engineer Brigade Command Sergeant Major, at Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri. Not too much longer, he was selected for the Transatlantic Division Command Sergeant Major, a strategic two-star command with US Army Corps of Engineers and he continues to serve there giving professional counsel to the Army civilian and uniformed Soldiers stateside and those deployed in the Middle East and Central Asia.

Harold Reynolds, Command Sergeant Major, Commander and Dean of the US Army Sergeants Major Academy: In 2003, as a platoon sergeant in B Company, 307th ENG Battalion, SFC Reynolds was forced to separate from his platoon during the deployment to Iraq OIF1. The platoon he trained, mentored and prepared to go to war with was tasked to support Special Forces units in preparation for planned airborne operations in Iraq. While the rest of his platoon prepared with Special Forces in Saudi Arabia, SFC Reynolds and a handful of his platoon headquarters Soldiers deployed with the rest of the B Company to Kuwait. Instead of an ego being bruised, SFC Reynolds accepted his mission and drove on. Days later, Harold Reynolds would be recognized by the Division Commanding General for his prep of “sand table” used for the Combined Arms Rehearsal the day before our unit crossed the border into



Figure 3: Left: Command Sergeant Major Harold Reynolds and Right: Brigade Command Sergeant Major Smith Forward Operating Base Pasab, Kandahar Province, Afghanistan, MAR 2011.

Iraq. No matter the mission, SFC Reynolds delivered excellence. The day after the invasion, mission would change, and SFC Reynolds once again united with his platoon and did phenomenal things throughout the deployment.

Returning from that deployment a year later, SFC Reynolds was promoted and became my right hand as 1SG of B Company. I had already witnessed what type of person and leader he was and I was grateful that we were paired together. He was always supremely calm in the face of chaos, and always the “voice of reason”, and because of that he was very likable, trusted, a great trainer, and remains one of my very favorite people. In 2011 I was happy to see CSM Reynolds and give him a high-five in Afghanistan as our unit replaced and transitioned with his. After years of successfully leading Soldiers at the Battalion and Brigade level, the Army recognized CSM Reynold’s unique skill sets and placed him as the Commander and Dean of the US Army Sergeants Major Academy, teaching and mentoring the most senior Non-Commissioned Officers we have in our Army.

Three Wise Men – Lessons from Trusted Mentors for the Army Leader
LTC Jason Borg

If given a chance to interview three very remarkable, senior and experienced Army leaders, what questions would you ask them? Would you want to know how they became the person they are, who their influencers were, and some of the stories or lessons they have learned throughout their combined 90 years of service? Would you want to know what makes them tick as a leader, and if they can reveal any secrets of their success? As a fellow Army leader, and a student of organizational leadership, I did.

I recently had the privilege of interviewing two current and one recently retired Command Sergeants Majors, all three highly successful, and very senior leaders for our Army. They have left such an impression on me, from the time I first met them, and it continues to impress me, watching them advance to the very top of our Army's Leadership. They continue to grow, develop, and mentor the people around them inspiring me to ask them for some explanation or blueprint for their success.

The Building Blocks.

Many leaders are innately gifted with the charisma, and equipped with essential tools to lead people. Most aren't as lucky, but through training, and experience develop on their path to become leaders.

I questioned these leaders on life before the Army curious if they oozed of leadership and if they knew that they were destined to be *"All that they can be"* when they first enlisted in the Army? What lessons did they learn as a youth that they carried with them and attributed to their successes?

When I asked CSM Reynolds how he started his progression in his words he replied with *"humble beginnings..."*. CSM Reynolds grew up in Clarks Grove Minnesota, a small farm town, POP. 350, where he usually told people *"I'm from Albert Lea"* the next largest town, 10 miles away, *"because people can find that town on the map"*. He described *"the closest family of color was probably 10 miles away which happened to be my cousin."* He laughs. *"But I will tell you, growing up I didn't know any different I was just a kid from Clarks Grove. Not Hispanic, not white, not Asian, not nothing, just a kid from Clarks Grove who played baseball and got along with everybody."*

Similarly, Ron Johnson grew up in a small town in Indiana. *"The family wasn't well off but we also weren't hungry. Just an average small town American family. I had a paper route, I cut grass for money. I remember my grandma house was one of the yards I always cut, it was on the other side of town. But yet I could ride my bicycle and steer with one hand and pull the lawnmower with the other hand to get to the other side of town to cut my grandma grass."*

Coincidentally I learned that all three, Hal Reynolds, Ron Johnson and Todd Burnett all grew up in small towns. Todd Burnett from a small town in Ohio, Ron Johnson from a small town in Indiana and Hal Reynolds, from a small town in Minnesota. All three came into the Army searching for opportunity and a start for something better. Probably not that different of a reason than any of the rest of us, but it may add light that, good leaders, and great leaders can come from anywhere. The more I talked to them, the more I realized, it is not so much the where you come from, or the why you joined that brings success, but what is critically important is your work ethic, who you are as a person, your want to succeed, and your desire to help others.

All three believed in having a hard work ethic. Young Hal was very active in sports. *"I wanted to play on the football team. But because my mother worked and dad worked and I lived 10 miles from this town, she told me "if this is what you want to do you have to figure it out." He continues "and so I did. I made sure I had good tire pressure on my bike and I rode the 10 miles for the two a-days. But for me early on Reynolds, if I was to go back and talk to him that will serve you well, because you took a problem you took something that you wanted to do and you figured it out in the most expeditious manner that you could based on the resources that you had available, which fast forward to today, that is pretty much what I do now,"* ending with a chuckle.

Soldier First.

We all have pains and hard lessons and so I asked CSM Johnson about hard early lessons, or people that helped develop him and what he learned. He explained the importance of adaptability and the idea that being a Soldier first is all important as leader. He believes that there is no "24-month Soldier". You are always a Soldier first, and not just for the first two years of your career. In this way, you understand how to do the core of your job and you understand what it takes to take care of the Soldiers under you.

"Up until I went to Germany, it was all construction and then I got to Germany and I was a Staff Sergeant (SSG). It didn't matter if I was a SSG for one month, which I was or, if I was a SSG for ten years, the expectations were SSG. In Germany in the 94th (Engineer Battalion) there was still construction but in a combat context. The 94th was a lot more focused on the tactical. It was a shock to me and I sucked for about the first year. First Sergeant (1SG) rode my behind non-stop. He rode me hard and I hated it. I had to adjust...I was out of my comfort zone...Then he started to come around and treat me different and I had to reflect and the reason he was treating me different was that I had finally come into the role...That was that first year when it was really rough. He whooped me into shape. Because the first five to six years it was all construction...It was really [1SG] Fitzgerald in Germany whooping me into shape. Helping me realize it's just another step... I am a Soldier first, I need to learn how to operate in austere environments and then I can build something when I get there."

Great minds must think alike. I asked CSM Reynolds, what advice does he give privates or young sergeants who aim to be a future Command Sergeant Major. CSM Reynolds believes it also begins with Soldiering. *"You have got to be dedicated and committed to the Army mission...If you do these things well, you will progress. Then he goes on to discuss what he uses*

in in-briefing and counseling new Soldiers referring to it as the “nuclear triangle”. He describes it, “and within the triangle there are smaller triangles with things like APFT (physical fitness), height and weight, counseling.... the point is the Army in some people eyes is really easy...but when you look at all the different things that you have to do as a Soldier and a leader, it really is tough. So to the young private, you are going to have to do a lot of balance and prioritizing for you specifically for where you want to be. You have to do the Soldier things right first, and then the leadership stuff will come because you understand how the Soldier will work and what it is that they need to better themselves. Because once you put those stripes on, it is all about the Soldier and has nothing to do with you anymore.”

Be Authentic

I asked CSM Johnson if he had any slogans or sayings that he carried with him throughout his career to motivate himself or others. Admittedly he told me he had to phone a friend to help him, but he did mention one. He explained that a key to his success has been remaining authentic to the person who he is, and trusting in yourself to do what is right. This is something he described as *“Dancing with the one who brought you”*. In his words, *“If you are trying to make a decision and you’re going into a situation where you are not quite sure of how to carry yourself or how to act...you just got to remember that you are the sum result of all your experiences. And who you are got you to this point so keep being you are...You can’t teach an old dog new tricks...You know it’s worked for you.”*

This advice of being who you are is also echoed by CSM (Ret) Burnett. Todd remarks that some people feel forced to do what they don’t want, but shouldn’t. He remembers, *“when I was at Westpoint I was shocked when a couple of guys got their branch and I remarked you don’t look very happy, you branched Infantry? And they said I don’t really want to do it but that is the big thing. And I told them no. That is not the big thing. I said do want you want otherwise you aren’t going to be happy. and it’s going to impact people”*. CSM Johnson’s, and Todd Burnett’s remarks serves as a powerful message that being authentic not only means being able to trust yourself to do the right thing, but if we aren’t authentic and true to who we are, then that ultimately affects everyone around us.

Taking Care of People.

Ultimately, leadership is about taking care of people, and inspiring them, helping them to become better. Todd Burnett, Hal Reynolds and Ron Johnson live by this rule and I believe it is the essence of what makes them so inspirational and good at being leaders. You cannot succeed in the Army without a want and desire to care for others.

Early one morning at his first duty station in Fort Bragg, young Private First Class Hal Reynolds was driving into work and got a flat tire. Knowing that he had no other option, he ran the rest of the way into work and reported to his squad leader, no doubt dripping with sweat and fear for being late. What he believed was going to be a reprimand turned into something entirely different and gave him a powerful lesson that the being in the Army, is about taking care of

each other. CSM Reynolds reflects, "So I run to work and get to work and let my squad leader know and he can obviously see me sweating and everything. He asks me to just stay here and I'm thinking I'm about to get the smoking of my life and I'm mentally preparing myself...He comes back five minutes later and hands me an envelope. The envelope contains some money that he collected from the squad to help me buy the gas to put in the vehicle, that would get me through the rest of the week until we got to payday. And so that lesson again that [in the Army] it really is more of a family than it is a job. And everybody really does care for you."

The Army's Leadership often hands out coins to give to Soldiers to instantly recognize appreciation or high performance. Some of these are elaborate and have designs and logos and campaigns and history on them. They are a great tool for recognition and the longer you are in the Army, the greater collection of these coins you will get. My favorite coin, and probably the most unique is one that I received from CSM Burnett. It is smaller than a quarter and in the shape of Command Sergeant Major rank. On the back of the coin it reads "you have to care that much". It is a saying that Todd Burnett has used and continues to use to this day only altered now by the addition of "Leadership matters". I asked him what the meaning of it was.

"I think caring that much means putting yourself out there and your vulnerable to the things that have impacted you...By showing people you care that much, people will perform at such a higher standard...You make yourself night, day, anytime somebody is having a problem, you care that much, there just going to do that much and elevate their performance."

Todd goes on to discuss why leadership matters. *"The word leadership I have come to the reality it is so abused because people say that they are a great leader. But what are you doing to show you are a leader. Because to me, I know what it means...But leadership means engulfing yourself into something and trying for something higher and giving back...It's not about you. It's about somebody else...If we always remember people matter because nothing is successful without the people around you."*

Final Words of Wisdom

CSM Johnson – Do every job the best you can. Everything happens for a reason.

CSM Reynolds – Look at your rater's (supervisor) support form. It will allow you to understand their vision and initiates conversation and dialog on how to get there.

CSM (Ret) Burnett - Worry about the position you are in and the next position will come. Focus on what you are doing and everything else will come.

It was my distinct privilege to interview and reconnect with three extraordinary people that left lasting impressions on me through the way they carry themselves, their unshakeable confidence, and awe inspiring leadership. All totaled, these three have a combined 90 years in the Army, filled with leadership experience and my hope was to capture some golden nuggets, key thoughts, stories, and philosophies that have helped them develop into the leaders that

they are. They are what I would consider trusted mentors. Not only would I get a chance to reconnect with people I love, perhaps learn some tools for success, but I hope any of the lessons from the interviews can benefit a much broader Army and leadership driven audience. You can see more and watch the interviews in their entirety at:

- RON JOHNSON: <https://youtu.be/CKDfzYrTsrs>
- TODD BURNETT: <https://youtu.be/LlxWge0StvA>
- HAL REYNOLDS: <https://youtu.be/TG9uk-2sg8k>

CSM Ron Johnson (21 MAR, 2017):

00:00. I was a non-conformist. I was the smart bored one, caused a lot of trouble. I barely graduated.

2:07. Graduating highschool. Final exam and Last class and test. Deadlines motivate.

4:30. Homecoming. Meeting wife Janet at 15 years old and started dating.

6:20. Enlisting in the Army. What's after graduation. Proposing to Janet.

8:35. Starting Army, fired in the first two minutes.

9:57. Reflecting back to CSM Gerald Jones, one of my drill sergeants.

11:35. Joining Army with learning a trade. Construction Engineer. Being able to do things.

13:40. Learning and listening to the E4s. Best carpenter in squad. SGT Baxter "Shut up and listen to Wong."

16:10. Corporal Johnson. Honduras. SPC to Corporal. Fort Lewis E1-E6. Always construction.

18:50. Yakima. Learning Stuff. Do what you think needs to be done.

20:50. Work ethic, get the job done best you can.

21:17. As a SGT went to Desert Storm. 1991. Built Assault Pipe line.

23:00. Learning about the expectations of being a SSG. Out of the comfort zone. 94th ENG Battalion. 1SG R.M Fitzgerald.

25:30. Stupid decisions. Bad advice.

28:30. Whooped me into shape. Looked up to my PLT SGT and 1SG. 1SG Fitzgerald taught me I am a Soldier first.

30:00. Slogans. Dance with the one that brought you. Who you are got you to this point so keep being who you are.

32:19. If you are a leader you are going to get burned.

CSM Hal Reynolds (18 MAR, 2017):

00:00. Hal as a kid – Humble beginnings

2:01. Football. Early lesson on “Figure it out”.

4:15. Other sports. Boxing and wrestling

4:45. High-school, fair to partly cloudy. Didn’t have to study hard to pass a test but didn’t do the homework. Good relationships with teachers and students.

6:00. Get along with anybody – helps me as a leader to see other sides of a conversation

6:38. Deciding on Army and Airborne. Buddy talking about airborne. Describes opportunities in Clarks Grove. Army benefits were appealing.

8:50. Back up plans. Who do I know. Dishwasher. DJ for the county ice-skating rink.

10:35. Basic Training. Culture shock. Had I not left I would never know.

12:20. All I knew was training. I didn’t understand that the Army wasn’t just train, train, train.

15:15. PFC Reynolds learning it really is more a family than it is a job.

17:40. SGT Reynolds. From the frying pan to the fryer.

22:40. Other schools. Always be in good physical condition. Reason for going to Jumpmaster.

E1-E5 in two years / 7 months. Sapper Leader 1ST leadership school.

27:20. Getting to Ranger school. Failed PT test.

30:30. Go to Alaska. Getting Ranger Slot. Sapper Leader Course led to Air Assault, Pathfinder.

33:39. Focus on what you need to do to be better now and the next rank takes care of itself.

35:13. Alaska. LT enables me to get promoted to SSG. Promotion to SSG, SFC, MSG.

37:20. Slogans. Too Dumb to Quit, explained. Sappers really are too dumb to quit but in an affectionate way, because they are going to do anything they can to get the mission accomplished.

38:25. Hoo Raw Kill. But when you break down kill. Terminate, eliminate, finish. But if you were to finish something everyday imagine what you could accomplish in a week’s time, in a month’s time, in a year’s time. So Hoo Raw Kill really means finish something get after it. Hoo Raw kill is motivating to people. The point of it is to finish something.

39:10. You don’t have to know what you are doing just do it. He really described to me what I was about to get into as an Operations Sergeant as a platoon sergeant then a first Sergeant then a sergeant major. And in any one of those positions I didn’t know what I was doing. But I knew I had to do it. I had to figure it out. Sometimes it a matter of what do we inherit. what makes sense to us, what do we need to change. And doing that evaluation of our environment first and then getting after it.

41:20. How do I get to CSM? Nuclear Triangle. Prioritize and Soldiering first.

43:50. Bad Advice. Don’t take care of your records. The point is you still need to take of you. If I don’t take care of me how can I take care of others.

44:50. Bad experience leading. Korea demolition range.

47:50. Lesson in OIF on destroying Barrels. Don’t blow the barrel.

49:30. What’s the key to connect with the next generation? Its engagement. What’s important to them. At the end of the day it’s the Army values that we can all agree upon. Its starts with engagement. For technology, we cannot be afraid of it. We have to know how it works.

Soldiers will forget everything except their phone. Experiential Learning.

52:30. Final words of wisdom. Look at your rater’s support form. Understand their vision, and how do you accomplish that. Helps to start the conversation.

CSM (Ret) Todd Burnett (24 MAR, 2017):

0:00: Discusses how he maintains energy. I feel like I'm impacting and giving back.

:52. Difference between Leaders and Managers. Being authentic. Forcing people to do what they don't want to do. Not happy with branch. Do what you want to be happy.

3:10. There are only two things you do in the Army on your own. It's a team sport.

6:10. Discussing "you have to care that much". It's not about you. It's about somebody else. If we always remember people matter. It's about the people around you.

7:45. Leadership matters. People matter.

9:36: Before the Army. I grew up with my dad. We was very hard but he was fair. No military background. From a small rural town. I had two DUIs. Wrestled and baseball.

11:45. Joined the Army spontaneous. My dad said what makes you think you can do it your brothers couldn't.

13:00. Influencers prior to the Army. Older neighbor guy Jake Handy. He was an influencer because he took time and listened to me. Grandpa Donald. Worked for the same creamery for 45 years. Hard work wins the day. You got to give a fulls day work for a fulls day pay. My grandpa always had time for me.

15:10. 1SG James Parker. Grabbing the Guidon. He took to me and became almost a father figure. Almost like a father figure. Gave me my air assault coin. Soldier of the year.

18:08. Example of what I did not want to be. Squad leader. SGT Kane. You need to do everything that guy does because he is good. Ethical dilemma. That had an impact on me because I couldn't believe it.

22:10. Worst advice. Leaders that say best just to be quiet and do it. I never really took that to heart. Everything is impactful. Being hooah and wanting to get that mission done.

23:50. Bad thing that happened as a leader. Demo range in Honduras on the side of a mountain and the whole mountain caught on fire.

24:55. Meeting wife. Arrived at Fort Bragg Mar 89 out of jump school. Drove to Ohio 16 times. I believe in love at first sight. Hypothetically proposing by phone. Married in 6 months. 27 years married now. I would have divorced me about a dozen times over.

28:05. Advice for Soldiers and Sergeants. Knowledge is power. Be as open and gather all the information you can. Never say no. BNCOC, White Slip. Don't expect nobody to do something that you would not do and people will follow you. He never told us to do anything. He was tough but he was fair. And find those people. Two or three people in the middle of the night, they would help you. They will make you.

31:00. I never really knew I was going to be CSM Burnett. Just worry about the position you are in and the next position will come. Focus on what you are doing and everything else will come. All the jobs were fun.