

Lessons from a sheepdog

Sean Kilcarr September 25th, 2009

“Remember this: you’ve got to take care of your people, but don’t forget to also take care of your sheepdogs.” Lt. Gen. Russel L. Honore (Ret.), from a recent speech on Leadership and Preparedness in the 21st Century.

It may seem a bit odd, this reference to sheepdogs by retired **Lt. Gen. Russel Honore**, who won a plethora of plaudits for commanding Task Force Katrina back in 2005, but bear with me here. I had the great privilege to hear the General speak at TMW System’s 2009 TransForum user conference this week and let me tell you, his rousing speech really drove home what the concepts of leadership and responsibility are all about “and he used that sheepdog analogy near the end of his talk to illustrate the value of personnel who perform tough and often times thankless tasks.

The sheep often forget why there are sheepdogs; all they see is an animal barking at them, driving them this way and that, Honore said. They see how the master takes care of the sheepdog. How it sleeps in the house apart from them. They produce the wool that makes the money; the sheep often think “we do all the work. Why is the sheepdog treated differently?” •

The reason, the General stressed, is that the sheepdog is there for when the wolves come “wolves that, in the context of his analogy, kill indiscriminately ... and often kill “just for the hell of it.”

Even though the sheep may often despise the sheepdog, it is the sheepdog that takes care of them; that drives off the wolves, Honore said. And remember this: compared to wolves, the sheepdog is often underweight and smaller. Yet it goes out to defend the flock. Sometimes, the sheepdog comes back missing an ear or with other injuries; sometimes, the sheepdog does not come back at all. But it goes out to defend the flock nonetheless, despite the danger.

Taking danger head on, despite the risks, is something General Honore knows a lot about. A native of Louisiana of what he calls French-American Indian-Spanish heritage, Honore spent 37 years in the U.S. Army in a wide variety of posts: commanding the 2nd Infantry Division in Korea; vice director of operations J-3 for the Joint Chiefs of Staff in Washington D.C.; assistant commandant at the Army’s Infantry School in Ft. Benning, GA; and assistant division commander of the 1st Cavalry Division out of Ft. Hood, TX.

Honore is famous for his service in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, taking over recovery efforts for New Orleans and the rest of his native state with a firm yet fair hand and earning the title John Wayne Dude from the city’s mayor, Ray Nagin. He came off the doggone chopper, and he started cussing and people started moving. And he’s getting some stuff done, Nagin said at the time.

Yet the General did not dwell much on what he did during those long, weary days in the stifling heat of late August 2005. Rather, he stressed that there were valuable lessons to be learned

from that terrible catastrophe ones that all Americans should heed. It's at the heart of what he calls creating a culture of preparedness so both citizens and businesses can survive and recover from the impact of any sort of disaster.

[Here's a taste of what the General is like, both from his days on the ground after Katrina and as a speaker, sharing his thoughts on leadership and preparedness with Coca-Cola executives and managers.]

Leadership means being prepared "and you truckers know something about that. You delivered the supplies to help us recover from Katrina," Honore said at TMW's conference. "But I ask you: how many of you have three days supply of non-perishable food and water in your house right now? How many of you have an emergency evacuation plan for your families? Many people think something like Hurricane Katrina can't happen to them. Let me tell you it can happen. Look at Atlanta this week, suffering from flash floods. It can happen and routinely happens, all over this country."

The General boils that all down into a phrase he made famous in a press conference during Hurricane Rita recovery efforts: "Don't get stuck on stupid." He pointed out, for example, that a major high school and hospital in New Orleans had big backup generators on hand should the city lose power in the event of a natural disaster. But guess what: those generators were, in each case, located in the basement of the buildings and thus were destroyed by flood waters.

"Let me tell you this: when we lose electricity, we go back to the way we used to live 80 years ago, instantly," Honore stressed. "I know this stuff is pretty dull, but it's important for Americans and American business to get and remain prepared." •

This notion of being prepared in order to face down heavy odds should be nothing new to Americans, the General pointed out. His favorite example of this "can do" spirit is none other than George Washington, the nation's first president and commanding general.

"Go back to a cold Christmas night December in 1776," Honore said. "Our army back then sat freezing in the snow, 90% of it sick or AWOL [away without leave]. Most didn't have shoes and much of their ammunition didn't work. What did they have to look forward to? There were no Veterans hospitals; social security didn't exist. And they were facing the British army; the most powerful army in the world at that time."

"So what did General Washington do, faced with this sad state of affairs," asked Honore? Washington attacked; his troops crossing the ice-choked Delaware at night in boats confiscated from nearby fishermen, marching through the darkness in frigid temperatures, and then hitting Trenton, NJ, at dawn, killing or capturing over 900 Hessian mercenaries fighting in the British army.

"Remember that: they attacked and they kept the Revolution alive, right at the edge when it flickered and almost went out for good," Honore stressed. "We must not forget their sacrifices

and what they did so we can enjoy our freedoms today. Sure, there's a downturn right now and we might have to make sacrifices to get through it but we'll be better for it in the end. Our obligation is to leave our country free and strong, in memory to those who volunteered to fight for freedom back then many who weren't free, being indentured servants and slaves."

Honore said fighting for freedom, be it on the battlefield or in business, is a critical part of America's heritage, for while to be born free is an accident and to live free is a privilege, to die free is a responsibility.

Ladies and gentlemen, this is your world "and your world will be more volatile in the next 20 to 30 years than it was in the previous 20 to 30 years," the General said, "and that is being proved more so every minute; just look at today's announcement that Iran has a second plant developed to uranium enrichment, this one located near one of its military bases. As the specter of nuclear weapons in the oil patch again raises its ugly head, it brings home how critical true leadership skills are going to be in dealing with this ongoing crisis."

"That's why leadership revolves around three things: seeing first, understanding first, and then acting first. There's a value in being first, in recognizing and then acting on danger," Honore said. "Leadership is about innovation and ingenuity; it's about being prepared not just to help yourself but to help others. How you survive a disaster, whatever it may be, directly relates to what you do before it strikes. Because if you wait for things to break before fixing them, they will break at the worst time."

Valuable lessons indeed, from a veteran sheepdog that helped keep the wolves at bay for a long, long time.