



Lesson 5: Goals and standards for reenactor officers

Reference: *The Officer's Guide*, 1944 edition.

Study assignment: Lesson text, attached.

What is a reenactor officer?

Reenactors are just like everybody else, but more so.

What are your expectations? What do you want to gain by joining this demanding, marriage-sapping, wallet-shrinking way of life? Do you just want to hang out with buddies? Do you want to live out fantasies?

Make men believe they are leaders and they will become leaders.

—David Hackworth

One thing every reenactor can count on: *you will bring out of reenacting exactly what you put into it.* Before you start maneuvering or fantasizing about pinning on rank, think about what and how much you can contribute to your

unit and to the hobby and its mission.¹ Do you have time? Are you willing to do the work? Are you willing to pay the price?

If you honestly answer “no” to any of these questions, rethink the quest for rank. If you can be a great private, but you don’t have the personal commitment to be an officer, be the best private you can be. We need great privates much more than we need officers who can’t keep their promises.

Rank is not a status. Rank is a job. There are reenactors wearing officer rank who regard it as a reward for longevity or popularity. For them, their rank is just costume jewelry. If you don’t have a job, the honorary rank is wasted. Remember: we all have the same rank (*reenactor*). You don’t carry a commission by authority of the President, you don’t take an oath. It’s not the rank you wear that makes you an officer: *it’s the job you do.*

Reenactor rank is usually inflated. There are actually good reasons for this. Most unit activities are small living history interpretations. If your unit is representing “Company G, 11th Infantry”, you should present a cross section of a rifle company. This might be a captain (CO), a first sergeant, a company clerk, a sergeant, and eight



¹ For purposes of this discussion, I propose three goals: (a) honor the veterans of WWII; (b) educate the public; and (c) have a good time. This is a pretty simple statement. The hard part is doing all three at once!

or nine privates. That's a good *representation* of a company for a weekend living history gig. But it is *not* a company.

Now and then, however, we go to the field for big events that have tactical exercises. At that point, your unit stops being a company and starts being a sort-of rifle squad commanded by a captain. The living history show model doesn't work. The reason has to be explained patiently to a lot of reenactors: *the tactics don't work*. If the captain doesn't understand why this is so, then his knowledge falls short of functioning as a commander.

But people are human, as I told a generation of West Point cadets. Nobody wants to take off his rank just because it no longer makes sense. Nobody wants to compromise and combine with other small units to form a realistic tactical unit. The result is a deception: what looks like a battalion of 400 reenactors is just "one squad, 40 times."

Earn your rank. The people who make the hobby work deserve better. Not every private Snuffy in the rear rank knows what's right, but most can sense when something's wrong. If you're wearing rank, you owe them more than that.

Knowledge, Skills, Attitude

Let's start with a fundamental question: *What should a reenactor officer be able to do?*

We'll take three elements of leadership, separately at first.

Knowledge: What should an officer *know*?

Skills: What should an officer be able to *do*?

Attitude: What should an officer *be*?

We will follow this scheme throughout the discussion: BE. KNOW. DO.

Here's the problem: when we encounter a reenactor wearing officer rank, we have no idea who he is or what he is. What does he know? What can he do? Is he actually in an officer job, or just wearing the rank? This is reenactor world. There are no real standards. Some officers are very good, some are oxygen thieves, and most are just trying to do their jobs as well as they can, usually without much help.

Without any standard, we waste time getting acquainted. When we gather in the field in complex organizations, we have to determine who is who and who is at what level of competence on the fly.

There are a couple of ways to deal with this. We can develop stable larger organizations out of small hobby groups and learn about each other by working together at events. And we can start to develop standards for reenactors who want to wear rank.

Basic soldier knowledge and skills

First, an officer has to be a terrific private. He has to know and demonstrate basic skills. Let's examine some examples.

- Minor stuff—but actual things soldiers had to know, such as:
- *Identify* the chain of command from the President down to the division or equivalent level commander for your chosen unit.
- *List* the eleven general guard orders in WWII.
- Necessary knowledge and skills learned by rote:
- *Recite* the nomenclature of the M1 rifle.
- *Demonstrate* knowledge and skill with the M1 rifle by field stripping and reassembling the M1 rifle, identifying each separate part or component. (Bonus points: field strip and reassemble blindfolded.)

- *Demonstrate* mastery of the basic school of the soldier and school of the squad (From FM 22-5).
- *Demonstrate* the basic skills of uniform maintenance and appearance (including brass and leather—be able to polish your shoes) by wearing your uniform properly and keeping it up to standards.
- *Demonstrate* the basic school of the soldier and school of the squad. (The fundamentals of close order drill from **FM 22-5**)

Advanced knowledge and skills

Once you have mastered the trade to the level of a trained private, you can concentrate on the more challenging things.

- *Read a map.* By this, I mean a military topographic map. This is a basic skill for any combat leader.
- *Learn land navigation.* How to find your location and move to a new one using map and compass. (Old Army wit: the thing most to be feared on the battlefield is a second lieutenant with a compass.)
- *Learn radio procedure.* Military radio procedure, not Citizen’s Band (“ten-four”).
- *Learn how the Infantry is organized and how it fights* (these are related, which is why most reenactor “tacticals” are stupefyingly short of the mark). If you’re armor or signal or anything else, learn Infantry first. That’s why I capitalize it.
- *Learn basic small unit tactics,* through squad and platoon. (Company will come later—master the platoon first.)
- *Learn basic scouting and patrolling* (**FM 21-75** helps).
- *Start embracing sound leadership practices.* Don’t be a private wearing officer rank.
- *Learn how to be a teacher.* This is the officer’s most frequent job. Master Army training methods.

Here is a proposed list of KSAs and at what level they should be mastered:

KSA	Description	1/2LT	CPT	MAJ/LTC
School of the soldier	Close order drill, individual	x		
School of the squad	Close order drill/squad	x		
School of the platoon	Drill and ceremonies	x		
School of the company	How to form and march a company	x	x	
M1 nomenclature	Know the names and functions of critical parts and assemblies.	x		
M1 field strip/reassemble	Be able to demonstrate and coach soldiers.	x		
M1 common stoppages/IA	Be able to teach in training and help a soldier clear a stoppage in the field.	x		
M1 maintenance	How to clean and inspect the basic infantry weapons in the field	x		

Map reading	Interpret a topographic map, as well as military map symbols and conventions.	x		
Land navigation	Use map and compass to locate your position and move to a new one.	x		
Radio procedure	How to construct and interpret signal messages using military standard procedure.	x		
The Infantry	Understand and apply the basic organization, tactics, and training of an infantry unit, including:	x		
	Operations (plans and orders)		x	x
	Small unit tactics	x		
	Scouting and patrolling	x		
Leadership practices	Learn and apply the accepted practices and principles of leadership.	x		
Training	Understand and apply the basic principles and practices of military training as applied to living history units.	x	x	x

Officer expectations

How do you want the men in your unit to think of you? What about reenactors in other units when you go to a large event?

- *Be at the events early, leave last.* Take responsibility.
- *Take charge at any event;* don't wait for somebody else to get people moving. Take authority.
- *Look correct and organized at all times.* Always be in proper uniform, properly groomed. Look like you're a leader.
- *Watch what's happening.* If somebody is doing something wrong, correct it (tactfully—and use the chain of command, don't intrude on a squad leader's job. Point the problem out to the direct leader.
- *Respect subordinate leaders and you will earn their respect.* But they should earn that respect. Be there to help if they fail. Everybody is allowed to fail; the only requirement is to learn from a mistake and never make it again.
- *Don't waste time blaming event managers or reenactor chain of command* if something goes wrong. Do your best to make it work for your people.
- *Treat your people fairly and don't play favorites.* A common reenactor mistake is to take an officer position and then continue to hang out with your buddies instead of doing your job. Some people naturally find this hard; for many, coming to an event is about being with special friends. That's okay. Just don't be an officer unless your responsibilities come first.

- *Put your people first.* In the US Army, officers eat last. That says it all.
- *Learn how to delegate, but don't expect people to do your job for you.* If you don't trust your NCO's and subordinate officers, they will stop trusting you and they won't waste energy and initiative. If you can't trust your NCOs and subordinate officers, you (a) have a problem with your expectations, or (b) you need new subordinates. Don't nourish Oxygen thieves, but don't assume you're the only one who knows how to do things.
- *Do all you can to see that your unit has a good time.* This is a simple hobby. We (a) honor the veterans; (b) educate the public; and (c) have a good time. Your most important responsibility is to make sure your guys do *all three. At the same time.*

Filling in the blanks

Consider a few things that will help you excel, but aren't usually in the reenactor's bag of tricks.

- *Set health and fitness goals.* You will perform better in garrison or in the field if you have physical stamina equal to your responsibilities. First, ask what your tasks as an officer require. If the answer is "huh?", then go back and read Lessons 1-4. Once your job—what it is and what you would like it to be—is defined, then ask brutally honest questions about whether you can perform these goals without excessive, performance-sapping, fatigue or risk to your health. If you admit to yourself that you aren't up to doing your job. If you can improve your stamina and endurance without endangering your health (hint: talk to your family doctor before you start running marathons!), then build a personal fitness program. In fact, even if it isn't essential to your hobby goals, do it just because it's essential to your enjoyment of life.

I'm 74 as I write this, and I go to the gym three times a week and on odd days I hike unless it's really hot (I'm in the Atlanta area, so it does happen), usually carrying a 40-pound MOLLE pack. Of course, I'm probably permanently brain-damaged from too many years in the machine, so tailor your program to your goals and level of health. Your family will thank you for it.

- *Keep a sense of humor.* Soldiers or reenactors have a keen sense of who is and is not full of shit. I don't know how else to say this and capture the precise meaning of this principle. If you're wearing rank, do your best to excel, but never forget you're a reenactor. And—this trick I mastered long ago as a tactical officer in OCS—you can make people do things that are hard, not much fun, fatiguing, and against their wishes at the moment *if you can keep them laughing.*

- *Know when to turn it on and when to turn it off.* Okay, by grace of God and authorization of the membership you are appointed Lord High First Lieutenant. Remember where you are and what you're doing. When you're performing your duties at an event, you take on the role and take it as seriously as the moment dictates. When you stand down from duty,



Their sons are carefully instructed from their fifth to their twentieth year, in three things alone—to ride the horse, to draw the bow, and to speak the truth.

— Herodotus, *On the Customs of the Persians*

remember that you have reverted to your permanent rank (reenactor). If you do the first as well as you can, your people will appreciate the second even more, and the value of your stock will increase.

- *If you're an officer, act like one.* In real life, sure, you're a lazy, inbred child of moral poverty, a shy and introverted information technology worker, and you mistreat your dog. Whatever. But when you pin on the rank, act like an officer and a gentleman. Check out Lesson 4. You eat with a fork, shoot straight, play fair, and never draw to an inside straight. Pull this off and two good things may happen. First, you'll be a better reenactor and perform your officer duties better than otherwise. Second, some of this strength of character may actually leak across into your real life. Be all you can be, as the recruiters used to say. What can you lose?

- *Know when to step down.* Even Broadway smash hits eventually close. Very few things in this hobby are as sad as the “eternal colonel”—the guy who was once a hot shot, made rank, enjoyed it, then didn't know when to move on. Personally, I don't think “term limits” are fair or useful above unit level. Knowing when to pack it in is a matter of individual character and judgment. Remember: if you've been a generalissimo for years, it means nobody else can move up. There comes a point we must be selfless enough to give other people their shot.

- *Never stop learning, never stop making yourself better.* The moment you decide you are satisfied with yourself is the moment you stop growing and start the long, sad slide down. There is nothing quite as misinformed as a reenactor who thinks he knows everything. Real soldiers take solid months of training and study to master the basics of the Army and of their jobs. How much time do you have in the classroom or in the field? Most “experienced reenactors” are well-meaning, smart people who have been doing stuff wrong for years. We're not reenacting reenactments—we're reenacting history, and there's a lot of history we miss if we stay in our tight little defensive position and don't venture out beyond the outpost line now and then.

- *As soon as you take your place, start developing your replacement.* Always be teaching. You won't be there forever—a statistical certainty! Find somebody you think will ultimately be better than you. Give him a chance to develop (which also means “give him a chance to screw up;” that's one sure path to growth). Too many leaders hang around and then just disappear, leaving a vacuum. *Vacuums suck.* (You heard it here!)

No man will learn to lead unless he is allowed to lead. Unleash talent, even if it might steal the light from you.

Finishing school

All the reviews of the officer corps and its history and quirks may seem to have little to do with bring a living historian—nothing at all, in fact, unless we are interested in living *history*, not just repeating the accepted but uninformed notions of traditional reenacting. While many individuals and no few units in the hobby work hard at interpreting the enlisted soldier and noncommissioned officer of WW II, the role and character and expectations of the officer are generally uninformed and inaccurate. To be an officer in a living history unit is to hold a status, generally based on aptitude, longevity, and personal relations. But it is seldom based on anything more than film adaptations and reenactor myth.

This doesn't need to be. There is a wealth of information available on the officer in WW II, and much of it is available on this site and through available references. Do the work; play the real role. It's more than historical interpretation—it's also a firm platform for useful leadership

techniques, principles, and standards that will make you a more effective leader in the hobby. Beyond that, it may well make you a more effective leader in your life outside the hobby.

If nothing else, work through these lessons and then start searching for more ideas. And it doesn't have to be about *you*. Make it about the people you lead (if you are not leading anybody, don't bother; your rank in that case is costume jewelry). Help them understand the roles and expectations of a good officer, and mentor the ones who will take over from you.

Be sure to take the attached quiz.



LESSON SUMMARY

1. Being an officer in the living history hobby is not a joke—unless you make it one. Your performance is based on what you put into your job. Your *job*. Rank is a job, not a status.
2. Rank tends to be inflated, particularly when many small units join to form a company or battalion for the field. You are not your rank; what you do should reflect your rank. Check your ego at registration
3. Earn the rank you wear. Pinning on bars does not make you better; unless you perform at the level of your rank, the bars are just a waste of shiny metal.
4. The expectations for an officer are based on *knowledge, skills, and attitudes*, not what you wear.
 - a. Any officer should first have demonstrated a knowledge of the *basic skills of a soldier*, to the extent practical in a hobby. Until you can be a good private, you have no business pinning on officer rank. This includes intellectual and motor skills, fitness, personal integrity, and attitude.
 - b. Once you have mastered the basic skills, start working on the ability to do the things that are part of the officer's job
 - c. Be the best you can be. People will notice; and they will notice if you're a phoney, someone just wearing a costume.
 - d. Always consider the mission: honor the veterans, educate the public, and have a good time. Your job as an officer and leader is to see that your unit meets the first two goals with your guidance and encouragement, and that they have a good time doing it. Too hard? If so, *don't be an officer*.
5. Never stop improving, and help your unit improve in all ways. Reward the best.
6. If you're going to be an officer, *never disgrace that position*.
7. Know when to let others have their chance.