

# DR. LEWIS SORLEY

---

Floyd D. Gottwald Jr. '43 Visiting Professor of Leadership and Ethics, 2009

## THE MILITARY VIRTUES

---

The first in a series of lectures prepared for  
the Class Lecture Series, VMI Center for  
Leadership & Ethics.

# The Military Virtues

by Dr. Lewis Sorley

---

A third generation West Point graduate, **Dr. Lewis Sorley** earned a doctorate in National Security Policy from the Johns Hopkins University and a Master of Arts degree in English from the University of Pennsylvania. After retiring from the Army following a distinguished career as an armor officer including tours in combat in Vietnam, as a tank battalion commander in Europe, and as a senior military assistant in the Office of the Secretary of Defense, he served as a senior civilian official in the Central Intelligence Agency.

Dr. Sorley has taught widely and often at numerous colleges and universities, including the U.S. Military Academy, University of Virginia, Virginia Tech, George Washington University, the University of Rhode Island, and the U.S. Army War College. He is the author of *Honor Bright: History and Origins of the West Point Honor Code and System* (McGraw-Hill, 2008), the Pulitzer Prize nominated *A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America's Last Years in Vietnam* (Harcourt Brace, 1999), *Honorable Warrior: General Harold K. Johnson and the Ethics of Command* (University Press of Kansas, 1998) and *Thunderbolt: General Creighton Abrams and the Army of His Times* (Simon & Schuster, 1992). Works currently in press or forthcoming include *Reflections: South Vietnam's Generals Assess Their War* (Texas Tech University Press, in press) and *Press On! Selected Works of General Donn A. Starry* (Combat Studies Institute, forthcoming).

During his visiting professorship, Dr. Sorley taught on the ethics of command in the Department of Psychology and Philosophy and offered an Honors Forum for the Institute Honors Program. In addition, he has broadly involved himself across the spectrum of the Institute's activities. His friendly personality, inviting demeanor and insightful perspective have endeared him to his many new friends at the Institute and in the Lexington community.

---

Class Lecture Series  
April 9, 2009

## The Military Virtues

Inaugural Class Lecture  
Gillis Theater, Marshall Hall  
Center for Leadership and Ethics  
Virginia Military Institute  
9 April 2009

Lewis Sorley

Floyd D. Gottwald Jr. '43 Visiting Professor of Leadership and Ethics

To illustrate some things about the military virtues, I want to tell you about four extraordinary soldiers. One is very well known to you, and I will save him until last. Two were very prominent in their day, and you may have heard of them. One I think will be new to you, and I will begin with him.

Private Robert Calvert, an individual replacement, arrived in World War II Europe just in time to take part in the Battle of the Bulge. Assigned as a rifleman to Company C, 51st Armored Infantry Battalion, 4th Armored Division, he was soon in the thick of a desperate battle during one of the bleakest winters in half a century.

"The worst time," he later wrote, "was one dark cold evening when... we were ordered to leave the foxholes we had dug for the night and climb aboard tanks and take off across the fields. 'General Patton,' we were told, 'says don't stop until you reach Bastogne.' " That order came on 22 December 1944, just one day before Calvert's twenty-second birthday. Bastogne was where the 101st Airborne Division was holding out, encircled by German units, while elements of Patton's Third Army struggled to break through to them.

Perhaps surprisingly, Calvert kept a journal. In it a succession of brief and matter-of-fact entries constitute a record of extraordinary courage and endurance. On the second day of the attack two of the five officers in Calvert's company were wounded, the first sergeant was captured, and most of the men in Calvert's platoon were killed, wounded, or captured by the Germans. The next day the company commander was evacuated with pneumonia and they lost Calvert's platoon sergeant because his feet froze. Calvert's squad leader moved up to become platoon sergeant and a private who had only joined the division in October took charge of their squad. It was then Christmas Eve.

During the night Calvert's platoon leader was killed by a mortar shell, only two months after he had arrived as a replacement officer. The company was now down to a single officer from the five it had had three days earlier. That Christmas Day, said Calvert, the company had fewer than a hundred men and was taking 15 or 20 casualties a day. The next day they got a new platoon leader. Also on Christmas Day, Calvert remembered, they watched as hundreds of C-47s parachuted supplies in to the surrounded 101st Airborne Division at Bastogne. One aircraft was hit by German antiaircraft fire, and Calvert saw five men bail out before their plane crashed to earth.

The day after Christmas one of the men was run over when a tank backed up over him, their medic was wounded, and so was their new platoon sergeant (formerly Calvert's squad leader). Also the last of the five original company officers of only four days earlier was wounded accidentally while breaking up some captured enemy weapons. Calvert's new platoon leader (as of earlier that same day) moved up to be company commander. A three-stripe sergeant took over as platoon leader. In Calvert's squad there were now only five men left, but it was still the biggest squad in the platoon. That day, too, Calvert noted, he took his first German prisoner.

The next day five replacements doubled its size and they were back on the attack. Calvert said that a good day would see them advance a mile, but some days they didn't get that far, and it was ten miles to Bastogne from where their assault had been launched. When the new sergeant-platoon leader's feet froze, he was evacuated and the last of the original squad leaders of a week earlier took over the platoon.

On 29 December, exactly a week after commencing the attack, Calvert's unit reached elements of the 101st Airborne Division on the outskirts of Bastogne. "We were impressed by how much more rested they looked than we did," Calvert recalled. The fighting was far from over, though. On 30 December the battalion received 90 new men but suffered 49 casualties. The weather continued desperately cold, too, so cold that the water in soldiers' canteens froze right on the bodies. They "ate snow or melted it down to drink or to make coffee." But that night, in a farm house a little to the rear, they did get Christmas dinner—only four days late.

"Thirty-five men in our platoon started out for Bastogne," said Calvert, "... but only five of us made it all the way." Those who survived had of necessity stepped up to assume leadership roles. Calvert was one of those, writing in his diary in early January, "I am now leader of a rifle squad, a tribute to how much seniority one acquires in an infantry company in five weeks."

Two months later, with his unit trying to capture a bridge over the Moselle River at a place called Karden, Calvert was shot twice in the leg. "I had long ago reconciled myself to the fact that I was going to die in the war," he reflected, but now it looked as though he might survive after all. No medics came to help him, so eventually Calvert hobbled back to the aid station under his own power. That was the end of the fighting for him.

While the 51st Armored Infantry was driving toward Bastogne on one axis, Lieutenant Colonel Creighton Abrams was leading his 37th Tank Battalion, another element of the 4th Armored Division, on its own push toward the encircled 101st Airborne. Abrams had been commissioned in the Cavalry, the horse cavalry, in 1936, serving first on the Mexican border with the 7th Cavalry Regiment. As war loomed, however, he was one of the first to volunteer for service with the newly-forming mechanized force. Eventually he was assigned to the 4th Armored Division where, in July 1942, at age 27, with six years of service and still a captain, he took command of the tank battalion he was soon to make famous. By September of that same year he was a lieutenant colonel.

Abrams and other young officers responded to the vision of General Adna R. Chaffee, who insisted that the armored force must be "a state of mind whereby a balanced team of arms and services works together, in a climate of equal importance and equal prestige." That was a superb formulation, for if there was no "first team" then nobody was on a second team.

Abrams was convinced that tough and demanding training both produced an effective unit and saved lives. At Pine Camp, on maneuvers in Tennessee, at the Desert Training Center in California, on hardscramble ground in Texas, and finally on the Salisbury Plain in England he urged his battalion to achieve perfection.

When, in England, he decreed that tank crews going through the gunnery course must get off two main gun rounds in a very few seconds, his company commanders complained that the standard was too difficult. Abrams put together a makeshift crew composed of battalion staff officers, drilled them a little, and then—with himself as tank commander—ran them through the course and met all the time requirements.

Then, when the company commanders came to him to say that it made the tank crews nervous to have Abrams or one of the battalion staff riding on the back decks of their tank as they went through the gunnery course, Abrams had an answer for that, too. "If it makes them nervous to have me on their back deck," he asked, "what are they going to do when the Germans start shooting at them?!!!" There were no more complaints on that score, either.

When the 37th Tank Battalion got into combat all the hard training paid off. DeWitt Smith, later a lieutenant general, was a lieutenant in one of the division's armored infantry battalions. Abrams made an indelible impression on him. "In the days of the young Colonel Abe," he recalled, "you could see him close up—chunky build, leather tank helmet, cigar chomped down, tanker jacket—see him, and hear him, as he personally led his columns across Europe. You could wonder at his guts and drive and energy. Or you could receive a field order from him—steady, clear, organized, confident in tone and content—and walk away certain of success. To a generation of draftees and ninety-day wonders, he was the embodiment of the professional soldier."

Staff officers at corps and division later revealed they tuned their radios to the frequency of Abrams's tank battalion just to be entertained by his hard-driving style of leadership. The battalion's motto was "Courage Conquers," and if ever a unit lived up to its motto it was the 37th Tank.

Despite Abrams's uncompromising standards in training and discipline and his relentless combat drive, his soldiers saw and responded to another side of him. Wrote one of his radio operators to Abrams many years later, "I still respect you as a soldier and love you as a fine human being. I teach children to grow up to be like General Abe." Imagine being a commander in combat and inspiring that kind of admiration.

Wrote his division commander of Abrams, "the brilliant combat record of Lieutenant Colonel Abrams constitutes one of the sagas of this war. His command was the first to cross the Moselle River, he led the advance which resulted in the relief of Bastogne, and his was the first element in Third Army to reach the Rhine." Abrams wound up with

two Distinguished Service Crosses, two Silver Stars, and a battlefield promotion to colonel. But he gave the credit to those he led. "I have travelled in gallant company," he wrote to his wife near the end of the war. Later, at the top levels of his profession, Abrams emphasized that "soldiers are not in the Army, they are the Army." And, he insisted—perhaps his favorite saying—"soldiering is an affair of the heart."

While Abrams and his tank battalion were roaring across Europe, on the other side of the world Lieutenant Colonel Harold K. Johnson was having a much different, and much more difficult, war. Commissioned in 1933, he was by early 1942 commanding a battalion of infantry in the Philippine Scouts. They fought valiantly but, outnumbered and short of food, ammunition, and medicine, and with no prospects of being reinforced or resupplied, they were eventually rendered ineffective and were ordered to surrender to the Japanese. Johnson survived the Bataan Death March and confinement in a series of prisoner of war camps.

In captivity Johnson held a succession of positions of trust, beginning with that of commissary officer for the prisoners, who in the vital matter of food chose the man they trusted the most. Johnson used the position to insist that those prisoners who were able to work and earn small amounts of money donate some of it to help those who were too ill to work. When the hospital's ration was cut he replaced the shortfall with purchases made from the commissary fund's profits. There is no doubt that in the process he saved many lives.

Then Johnson was among those evacuated to Japan and Korea on what were later termed "hell ships" because of the indescribable conditions aboard. He was on three such vessels, narrowly escaping death during bombing and strafing attacks by our own pilots—who did not know that there were American prisoners on board. Prisoners were dying by wholesale lots from disease, fetid conditions below deck, and lack of food and water.

On one ship Johnson traded his class ring, which he had somehow managed to hang on to up to that point, to one of the guards for some food and a little water. Another officer who was there later told of what Johnson had done. "He carefully brought this food and water down and, in view of all these men in that hold, he meted out what he had been given. In his lifetime many honors were accorded him, but never to equal how he was regarded by these men in this instance. It was a small amount of food and a small amount of water, but it was distributed with perfect integrity on his part."

Altogether Harold K. Johnson endured a total of 41 months of captivity, ending in a prison camp in Korea. He and others were there when the war ended, which it did with something of a bang that must have been extremely gratifying to the surviving Americans. A B-29 flew over the camp, parachuting food and supplies to the prisoners. One bundle broke loose from its canopy and smashed through the roof of the kitchen, another flattened the dispensary, and a third plummeted into a supply room attached to the prisoner barracks. All was forgiven, though, when another drop broke a high tension line and electrocuted five of the guards.

While Private Calvert and Lieutenant Colonels Abrams and Johnson were each fighting their individual wars, in Washington an absolutely indispensable man was guiding the larger war in all its many aspects. You will know at once that I speak of General George Catlett Marshall, throughout World War II the Army's Chief of Staff.

Marshall's austere demeanor is widely known; perhaps less appreciated is his wit. In a meeting with President Roosevelt, who was of course a former Assistant Secretary of the Navy, Marshall once requested that the Commander in Chief stop referring to the Navy as "we" and the Army as "they."

When he thought the situation warranted (on very rare occasions, it should be noted) Marshall was willing to put his job on the line. He became convinced at one point that Secretary of War Stimson was making a serious mistake in pushing for Plattsburgh-style camps as the primary training ground for new officers. That approach, used in World War I, had featured crash courses of 90 days for people fresh from civilian life. Marshall thought that was wholly inadequate to the demands of small unit leadership in modern war. But Stimson and his senior civilian associates could not be dissuaded. Finally General Marshall said to him: "Very well, Mr. Stimson, I have done my best and I have the entire staff with me. They all see this thing alike to avoid this dilemma... I tell you now that I resign the day you do it." Stimson dropped the plan.

Marshall took that approach only in matters he considered extraordinarily important. Usually, he told his biographer Forrest Pogue, he resisted various pressures to take policy matters public or otherwise force the issue. "I thought it was far more important in the long run that I be a well established member of the team and try to do my convincing within that team, rather than take action publicly contrary to the desires of the president and certain members of Congress," Marshall said. Not surprisingly, this earned him the profound gratitude of the President. "I'm not always able to approve his recommendations, and history may prove me wrong," Roosevelt recalled. "But when I disapprove them, I don't have to look over my shoulder to see... whether he's going to the Capitol to lobby against me, or whether he's going back to the War Department. I know he's going back to the War Department to give me the most loyal support as chief of staff that any President could wish."

That trust operated at the personal level as well, illustrated by a snatch of dialogue included in a map room display at Roosevelt's Hyde Park home. An aide reports: "Mr. President, General Marshall is here for his 9:30 appointment." Responds Roosevelt: "Ah, now for the *real* war!"

And no one could ask for a more loyal superior officer than Marshall. In 1942 he had working for him Colonel Russell Reeder, an infantry officer. Marshall sent Reeder to Guadalcanal with the mission of learning what he could of the combat there that would help other soldiers training and fighting elsewhere. Reeder went out, stayed for a number of weeks, talked to everybody from general on down to lieutenants, sergeants, and privates. The result he entitled "Fighting on Guadalcanal." It was not a conventional report. Rather it was an early version of what today we would call an oral history. Reeder told the story entirely in the words of the men he had interviewed.

When he got back to Washington, Reeder submitted the result to General Marshall's office, then went back to his own office to await the reaction. He waited for several days, but no word came. Reeder was becoming increasingly concerned that he had not produced what General Marshall wanted. Maybe, he thought, he should just have done a conventional report.

Then one morning he came to work, quite early as usual. When he got there a major was sitting at his desk. "Oh, no!" thought Reeder. "I've been replaced!" But that was not the case. Instead the major explained that he was from General Marshall's office, and that General Marshall was having Colonel Reeder's report reproduced in a million copies for distribution throughout the Army worldwide. General Marshall was personally writing the introduction, and he was putting out a warning that if anyone changed so much as a single word of what Reeder had written that person would be court-martialed. And, oh, yes, General Marshall wanted to know if Colonel Reeder thought blue would be all right for the cover. Reeder, profoundly relieved, agreed that blue would be fine with him.

Your Superintendent, General Peay, has written of General Marshall's "life of simplicity, uncompromising integrity, and seriousness of purpose," and that is it exactly. No officer of any service, or in any post, was more admired by military and civilian associates alike, nor set a more inspiring example for them all. Said General Bedell Smith, later an ambassador and a close friend of Marshall's: "I've seen General Marshall under all conditions of stress and strain, and I have never seen him fail to dominate every gathering by sheer force of his integrity, honesty, and dignified simplicity." Marshall, for his part, credited the Virginia Military Institute with giving him "a military heritage of honor and self-sacrifice."

On the day the war ended in Europe Secretary of War Stimson paid Marshall a generous but well-deserved tribute. He invited Marshall to his office, where he had assembled a number of generals and other high-ranking officials. In front of them Stimson said to Marshall, "I want to acknowledge my great personal debt to you, sir, in common with the entire country. No one who is thinking of himself can rise to true heights. You have never thought of yourself."

Private Calvert, a citizen-soldier, left the Army in 1946 after having attained the rank of tech sergeant. He went on to become an academic counselor and then a publisher and, sixty years later, published his own memoirs. He was concerned that the parts of that document describing his World War II service would overwhelm the rest, but finally accepted the inevitability of that since, as he wrote, "my military service was probably the defining period of my life."

Lieutenant Colonel Abrams advanced to full general and served for five years in Vietnam, the last four in command of all US forces in there, forces that were progressively reduced during his tenure—possibly the only instance in our military history of a commander sending his army home ahead of himself. As each unit packed up to leave, Abrams went to thank them and tell them goodbye. The 1st Infantry Division, he told its departing troops, "represents a constancy of those essential virtues of mankind—humility, courage, devotion, and sacrifice. I choose to feel," he added, "that this is a part of the cement, and the rock, and the steel that holds our great country

together." And then he quoted back to them their own great division motto: "No mission too difficult, no sacrifice too great—duty first!"

When Abrams himself returned home to become Chief of Staff, he set about rebuilding the Army to which he had devoted his life. Before death took him, two years into the job, he had plotted a course of regeneration and reform. Noted General Jack Vessey, former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, "when Americans watched the stunning success of our Armed Forces in Desert Storm, they were watching the Abrams vision in action. The modern equipment, the effective air support, the use of the reserve components and, most important of all, the advanced training which taught our people how to stay alive on the battlefield were all seeds planted by Abe."

Lieutenant Colonel Johnson fought his way back to professional prominence during the Korean War, where he commanded in succession a battalion and then two regiments, in the process earning a Distinguished Service Cross. He too became Army Chief of Staff, serving in that post during the difficult years of the buildup for the war in Vietnam, service made infinitely more difficult by President Lyndon Johnson's refusal to call up reserve forces for that conflict.

As everyone here knows full well, after World War II General Marshall served brilliantly as Secretary of State, President of the American Red Cross, and then Secretary of Defense; rebuilt and inspired war-devastated Europe with a recovery program that became known as the Marshall Plan; and was awarded the Nobel Prize for Peace.

Once at a West Point Founders Day dinner the oldest graduate present recalled how he had been a lieutenant when World War II broke out and had then quickly been moved up through the ranks to colonel. Meanwhile, he said, General Marshall, who was a major general when the war began, had advanced to full general. "Hell," said this old colonel, "they were promoting me faster than they were General Marshall!" Marshall eventually caught up, however, becoming near war's end the first officer promoted to a newly-established five-star rank as General of the Army.

These four exemplary soldiers differed in many ways—in their ranks and duties, in the circumstances of their service, in their backgrounds and ages and experience, but they were very much alike in the ways that mattered most. Each displayed courage, integrity, fortitude, loyalty, competence, selflessness, devotion to duty. All were men of compassion and decency. All earned the respect, admiration, and even love of those they led.

These virtues are not, of course, exclusive to the realm of military endeavors. They are needed in virtually all aspects of life, from the family through the world community. But, it might be argued, such virtues—which I have chosen to characterize for you as the military virtues—matter more in the military realm, simply because the stakes there are usually so high and the costs of failure so devastating.

Not all of us can be as exceptional as Marshall, as Abrams, as Harold K. Johnson, as Robert Calvert, although with us here this evening there may well be future exemplars of such brilliance in terms of the military virtues. But we all should try.

Once, when George Allen was coaching the Washington Redskins football team, as he approached a crucial game he sought to give his players some extra motivation. To that end he approached Mike Hull, a special teams player who had just been cut from the squad, and asked him to talk to his former teammates. Surprisingly, Hull agreed to do so. When he met with the team he spoke in very emotional terms of how fortunate they were to still be together, of what a privilege it was to be part of a team, and what that should mean to them and how they should conduct themselves. And whatever you do in life, he concluded, you should "do it with your mightiest heart." And then he broke down in tears. The effect on the team was dramatic. They went out and played a terrific game. But it did not end there. For years afterward people who were around the team would hear one player or another recall those powerful words: "Do it with your mightiest heart."

That is what we all can do. We can take inspiration from the greatest leaders, especially those who exhibit the military virtues, and give our best efforts to trying to live lives of comparable meaning and worth. Some of you will recall the Army's great recruiting slogan of many years: "Be All You Can Be." That was a wonderful formulation, because instead of pitting people in unproductive competition with one another it challenged each individual to become his or her own best self. In that sense all could be winners.

I recall for you, too, a splendid observation by General "Chesty" Puller on display in the VMI Museum. "A soldier... can never leave his children much in the way of wealth," he acknowledged. "But what he can leave them is a rich heritage of courage, of loyalty, of service to his country." I personally find that profoundly moving and reassuring.

+ + +

It has been a privilege for me to address the First Class of the Virginia Military Institute as you prepare to graduate and go out into the world. I want you to know that I am honored and grateful for the opportunity to do so. I have thought of you, and your fellow cadets, every day for many weeks, especially during my repeated trips through the beautifully green and heart-lifting spring of the Shenandoah Valley—driving up the Valley, as I have learned to say from reading William Davis, despite my southerly heading, and making the acquaintance of about a gazillion cows along the way. I have enjoyed knowing so many of you and have high hopes and expectations for your future success and contributions during lifetimes of service.

I presume to close with some didactic suggestions—advice, if you will—that might prove useful as you seek to establish who you are, and what you are, in the days ahead.

Make the most of whatever talents and abilities you have been granted. Be all you can be—the best soldier, the best leader, the best son or daughter, brother or sister, spouse, father or mother, friend, neighbor, churchman, citizen, the most decent human being. Be as courageous as you are able. Form alliances with others who share your commitment to fine values. Help your friends and colleagues. Celebrate their successes. Share their sorrows. Be true to yourself and your heritage. Be modest in your demeanor and speech and mindful of your shortcomings and failures. Put the well-being of others, especially those you are privileged to lead, ahead of your own. Make it fun for them (and for

yourselves). Continue to learn. Seek opportunities to teach. Read. Take responsibility for your actions. Live the military virtues. Do what's right.

+ + +

I have greeted in passing innumerable cadets, and will long hear in memory the response so often received: "Doing well, Sir!" You are indeed doing well, and I know you will continue to do so wherever your future lies.

Just one more thing. For those of you who are in my classes I take this opportunity to remind you once again of Sorley's Law: No Whining.

Thank you and Godspeed.