

One Percent

“ This pull quote is most likely going to go away, so just ignore it.

”

— DR. ALAN GROPMAN

At what cost to our nation do America's so-called “best and brightest” disdain military service for themselves — and for their children?

It's an oft-quoted statistic that just 1 percent of America's population serves in its military, sacrificing to protect the other 99 percent. Since its inception more than 230 years ago, America's

military officer corps has been, and continues to be, a dedicated and extraordinarily capable group of military professionals. Still, the declining numbers of veterans in Congress and the administration tell their own story: Military service is no longer a preferred career for many Americans heading toward leadership roles.

ILLUSTRATION: RICHARD TUSCHMAN

Dr. Alan Gropman, distinguished professor of national security policy at National Defense University and an Air Force retiree, draws on his experience to discuss what all Americans have to gain through military service;

Jeffrey Race, a Vietnam veteran and ROTC graduate of Harvard University, describes how his Ivy League education and his military service complemented each other; finally, Kathy Roth-Douquet and Frank Schaeffer, authors of *AWOL*, discuss some of the dangers of the widening gulf between American servicemembers and everyone else.

Character, cohesion, and mission

Military service changes one. Life in the armed forces tests one's capabilities and character; the transformation, therefore, is for the better. There are especially two aspects of military life that alter one's nature: the core martial value — cohesion — and the centrality of the mission.

Cohesion is the treasure all components of every armed force pursue. In my two tours in C-130s in Vietnam, when a crew member refused to fly into a particularly hostile zone (usually “discovering” some maintenance problem that could not be reproduced), we would say of him (crew members were all males then): “Although he can't perform, he looks good in the shower — and that's the only place he looks good.” A combat unit without cohesion might perform well on the parade ground, but it will crack under fire. The pursuit of unity is so sacred, leaders emphasize it from the outset.

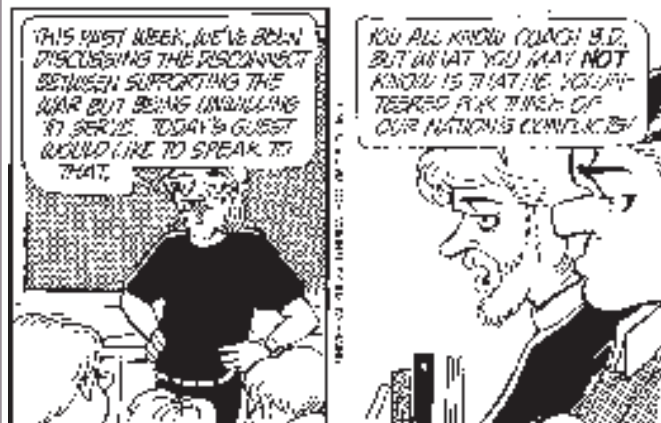
Uniformed recruits immediately learn they are part of a unit, and unit means one. A recruit trains with others to be employed as a part of an outfit so tightly bonded that the men and women would rather die than let down the members of his or her element. All the armed forces aim at bonding. Building and maintaining unit cohesion

company mission?” I asked, and he answered, to make money. Had he risked his life for the mission? I asked. No, he said. I told him I had, and I knew thousands of others who did so every time they laced their boots. “I understand mission,” I said — and was hired.

When the U.S. government was shut down in the mid-1990s, I was a civilian teaching at a war college. The school was ordered to operate, but all civilians were directed not to report to work. This would cripple the program, but orders are orders. On the first teaching day, none of the 20 civilian professors came to work — they had been told not to — but all of the nine retired military civilian professors did, with no coordination and no collaboration. We were then directed by a uniformed O6 to depart, and we refused. The mission of the college is to educate senior officers, the students were in the classroom, and therefore, so would we be. Extending oneself for the mission remains with one long after the uniform is put in the closet.

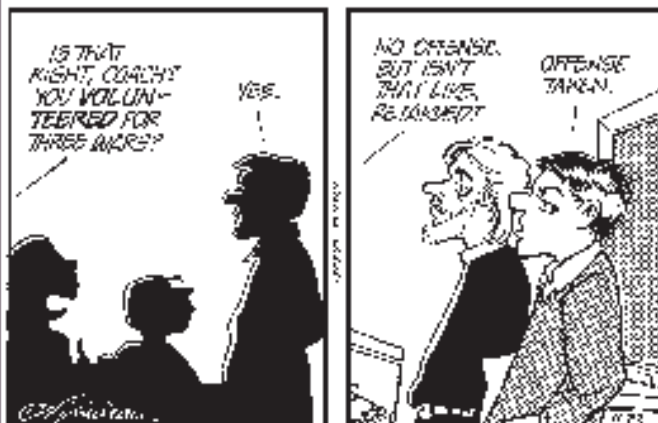
Dr. Alan Gropman served 27 years in the Air Force and flew more than 670 missions in C-130s in Vietnam. He has been awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross among seven other combat decorations and numerous other awards. His thoughts are his own.

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is so significant to the uniformed forces, it never leaves the professional and is a lifelong attribute singling out those who have served from those who have not.

The second momentous quality is mission orientation. Those who wear a uniform are in the profession of arms, a vocation with an unlimited liability, and it is the assigned operation that might demand one's life. Nobody wants to die, but it is the willingness to accept the unlimited liability that makes the military calling unique. Retiring from the Air Force more than 20 years ago, I was asked by a company executive vice president how I thought I might blend in with civilians in his company. “What is the



Education meets experience

My father had urged, and I had successfully resisted, joining the Boy Scouts. Harvard in 1961, however, presented a comparable grown-up option that, in the context of then-universal male military service, seemed terrific. I signed up for ROTC.

Military history bored me, but leadership training instilled a precious and hardly intuitive truth: Leadership means inspiring willing cooperation, which means building inner moral strength and the personal capacity to inspire others.



And parade drill! Never a team sport enthusiast, only now did I see what my life lacked: precision, teamwork, instant response in anticipation of what would later be critical situations, like combat in Vietnam or personal safety emergencies in civilian life.

Our first day of summer camp at Fort Devens in 1964 began with a powerfully memorable message. Still cadets, we ranked below enlisted soldiers. An old drill sergeant told us that in a year, we would outrank him and could issue him legal orders. His words as best I can recall:

"Today you are cadets. A year from now you will be officers. You will have authority to issue orders that can mean life or death for your men. Issuing orders sounds easy, but it isn't. The first skill you must learn, before you can issue orders, is to take orders. That is why you are here."

This got my full attention. I have never forgotten this simple talk as we stood in ranks before our barracks. Looking back, I see that it began the process of moving me from the simplicities of youth to the responsibilities of adulthood.

Early-1965 Army policy barred green lieutenants like me from assignment to combat. But the colonel in charge of the signal unit to which I was assigned got an exception to policy, because (he later told me en route to Vietnam), "I want a Harvard man in my battalion."

As the most junior lieutenant in the whole country, I became battalion sanitation officer under the practice of RHIP (rank has its privileges): I was in charge of toilets. Much to my fellow lieutenants' amusement, I showed during my first night's inspection how much I had learned in college by falling headlong into an open-trench latrine.

Soon given much greater responsibilities, I found my situation so fascinating that I volunteered for a second tour, transferring to an infantry slot on a remote district advisory team. One thing quickly became clear: Little in Vietnam was happening according to the mili-



tary's script. The harder we implemented doctrine, the worse became our situation. No one knew why.

The burning issue was why our allies were losing influence daily, despite hundreds of thousands of helpful foreign troops and a blank check for military and economic aid — while our enemies went from strength to strength with no such advantages.

Determined to answer this question after release from active duty, I returned to Vietnam on my own and spent two more years in research. I got the answer.

Back at Harvard in 1972, pursuing a doctorate in political science, I published my findings in a book titled *War Comes to Long An* (University of California Press, 1973). The lead review in *The New York Times* the following Sunday, it has never gone out of print and is now in the curriculum at all the service academies. Though my conclusions were then unhappy news in the context of a furiously raging war, the book is today the official canonical explanation of why our Vietnam effort ended so badly.

I retained my commission and continued performing two weeks of annual reserve training. My military advisory background and civilian experience in political, economic, and strategic analysis led to a series of unusual assignments over 20 years on top-level Army and DoD staffs. I know from senior colleagues that many otherwise doomed people are alive today, Americans and foreigners, because of what I learned, wrote, and did.

I was able to bring clarity to troubling public issues by applying skills honed at Harvard to the moments of

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Have a story about the value of military service?
Have a suggestion to narrow the gap? Share your thoughts and ideas at www.moaa.org/discussion (scroll down to One Percent).

“ When Frank’s son graduated from an exclusive Boston-area prep school and enlisted in the Marine Corps, his friends and neighbors wanted to know, ‘What went wrong?’ ”

closeness to history made possible by ROTC. I believe our world would be a better place if more graduates of elite universities could take up opportunities comparable to mine. In three decades of active and reserve military service, I was never pressed to violate my ideals. At the same time, my fellow officers were highly trained, highly motivated, and filled with integrity fully up to the standard I had been taught many years before in New England, and which is so lacking in much of public life today.

I look back on my military service as an unusual chance for personal and professional growth in challenging circumstances differing greatly from what I experience in my other work as an academic, management consultant, and business entrepreneur. Such challenging experience lends not just maturity but also a gravitas, a seriousness, a credibility hard to obtain otherwise.

And so I look forward to the day when I may pin my carefully saved lieutenant’s bars on the shoulders of someone dear to me.

*A 1965 Harvard graduate, **Jeffrey Race** looks back with unease at ROTC’s expulsion from his own college. The complete text from which this essay is excerpted may be read at www.moaa.org/march2007.*

Deciders and doers

ur book, *AWOL: The Unexcused Absence of the Upper Classes from Military Service — and How*

It Hurts Our Country, explores the danger of the disconnect between the leadership class and the military. Our personal experience opened our eyes to the problem. We come from privileged backgrounds. When Frank’s son graduated from an exclusive Boston-area prep school and enlisted in the Marine Corps, his friends and neighbors wanted to know, “What went wrong?” Similarly demeaning questions were asked about Kathy’s Marine officer husband: “Why would someone so smart want to be in the military?”

The misunderstanding of our loved ones’ choice to serve made us think about how the military is perceived by the most privileged Americans. *AWOL* is about the dangerous schism between deciders and doers in America — between the leadership class and those who serve.

A Duke University study shows that the more veterans in staff and elected positions in the House, the Senate, and the executive branch, the less likely the U.S. is to get into aggressive wars. The study also shows that if the country is forced to go to war, the more veterans who are in leader- [CONTINUES ON PAGE 98]