Maj. Gen. Penzler on leadership

illustration by Lynn Sawyer

You must recognize soldiers and civilians as individuals. Give them responsibility and allow them to do the job. Provide guidance, but don't over-supervise. Allow them the flexibility to do things in the way they think is right to accomplish the mission.

by Ann Keays

Although the same principles apply, leadership in peacetime is often harder in a staff position than in a TO&E unit, according to a senior TRADOC officer.

Maj. Gen. Harry Donald Penzler, TRADOC's deputy chief of staff for doctrine, has served in both capacities and cites examples to illustrate his point.

"In my most recent years, I have expanded my views on leadership through the tutelage of Lt. Gen. Walter F. Ulmer, who was commanding III Corps and Fort Hood, Texas, when I became his chief of staff.

"Gen. Ulmer told me that many of us understand leadership in units," said Penzler, "but he said the harder part of leadership is in a staff situation. Since then I've become quite attuned to that assessment—and I think he's right."

Penzler served in Vietnam and commanded an artillery battalion in Korea and a field artillery brigade in Germany. He was III Corps chief of staff from July 1983 to October 1985 and was involved in many conferences and workshops in which Ulmer expounded on various principles and initiatives.

The "power-down"concept, which was refined and used at Fort Hood, allows authority commensurate with responsibility to be shouldered at all levels. Training is decentralized, much as combat responsibilities will be decentralized in any future conflict. This decentralization of authority during training is intended to develop initiative in leaders and cohesion in units that will be needed in war.

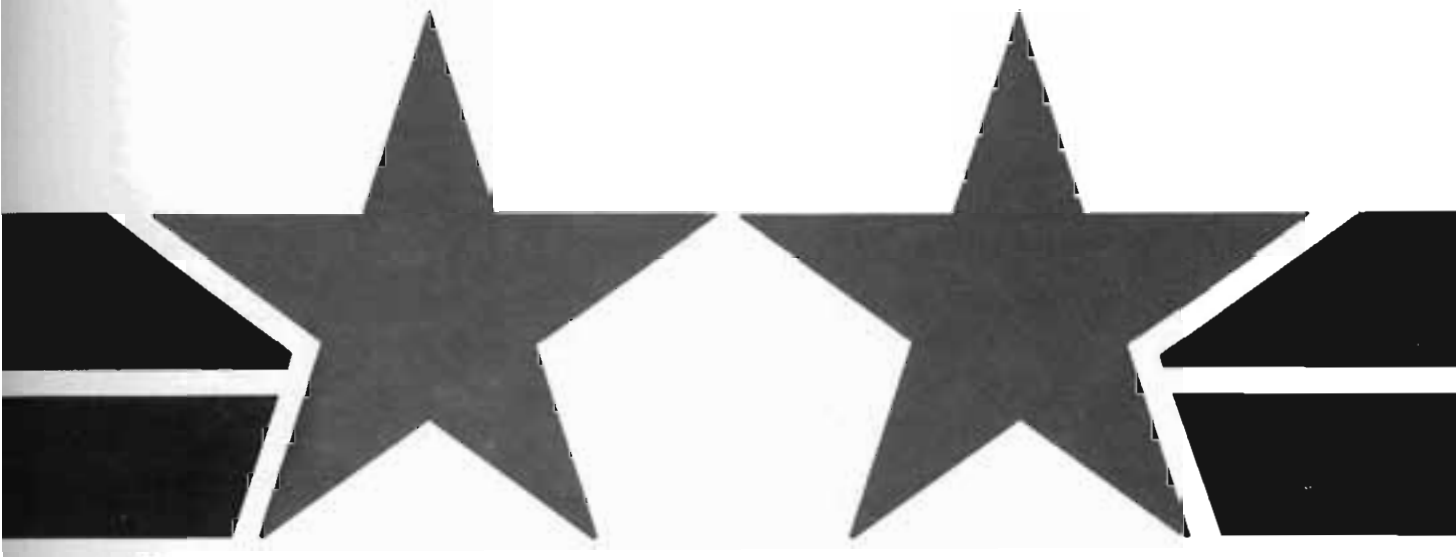
"We should train as we plan to fight and put the responsibility where it should be—at the lower level, with the squad leader," said Penzler. "The squad leader should teach his soldiers how to don chemical protective clothing, how to tear down an M-60 machine gun, and how to zero his rifle. Instead, we find many units that use a round robin for this type of squad-level instruction.

"Leadership in units revolves around the units, soldiers, equipment and training, what they do and how they do it, and the synergistic effect of all that together," said Penzler.

"People come into the Army's combat and combat-support units to do what they are trained to do—whether they are infantrymen, tankers, or artillerymen. If a tanker, they drive the tank, shoot it, and that's super. That turns them on and that's great.

"In a staff situation, it's different. Most warriors really don't want to be on a staff. That's not why they came into the Army. Staff work was always 'a necessary evil' we did on the side in the unit, but as a staffer, we have to do it full time. Many feel that staff work at higher headquarters is for those 'other' senior NCOs and officers.

"Also, on a staff, you work differently. You have many



contemporaries, and above that you have layering. The higher the level of the staff, the higher the rank of the people who work there. You may work with Department of the Army civilians. Most military people assigned to a high-level staff for the first time have never worked with them before and may not know what to expect," said Penzler.

He emphasized that many of the same leadership principles apply in staff and unit settings. "You must recognize soldiers and civilians as individuals. Give them responsibility and allow them to do the job. Provide guidance, but don't over-supervise. Allow them the flexibility to do things in the way they think is right to accomplish the mission. And as a staff officer, challenge them to put themselves in the position of decision-maker. Tied in with all this you have to have intra-office procedures, and morale and esprit-building activities—such as social, physical, and training programs—to make people feel they belong and that their families belong."

Penzler, who was commissioned through ROTC almost 29 years ago, said that too often officers who have never worked above the battalion level found themselves in a higher-level staff-officer position. "We can't expect them to start off as experienced staff officers," said Penzler.

"In the Army, we bridge that gap with the Combined Arms and Services Staff School, and the Command and General Staff College. Gen. Richardson, as TRADOC commander, turns over the TRADOC headquarters staff every three years, putting the staff officers back into TO&E units, and bringing TO&E people into TRADOC. We get recent unit experience—with mud on it from the field, so to speak—back into headquarters."

Penzler added, "We're here on the staff, representing the soldier, NCO, and officer in TO&E units. In TRADOC, that relates primarily to training, doctrine, and combat developments, the products that the soldier uses in his daily mission."

At the unit level, soldiers are working together as a team, developing esprit, Penzler said. "And they have a habitual association on the platoon, company, and battalion levels—the same people working together on a daily basis, knowing each other's strengths and weaknesses," he said.

"Many times you come into a staff for the first time in your secondary specialty, and your boss assumes you're trained in that specialty. You're also coming into an environment where your boss says, 'Here's your chair and your desk; you command all property within view.' That may include a nameplate and a telephone and probably about 10-percent interest in a xerox machine. That's different from running a company or a battalion. It's foreign to the person who has spent the last 5, 10, or 15 years in the field."

Penzler pointed out another important element of leadership—setting the example for others. "To be the leader in a unit, or on a staff, you must know your job. You must be a mentor and role model for your subordinates.

"But I think the biggest thing you have to do is adapt to the situation, the environment, to the leadership you're under. Then you have to establish the climate in which you feel comfortable and make your subordinates feel comfortable.

"I find that establishing goals and objectives for my people, directing their efforts, and focusing their attention is very helpful. I tell them what I expect of them, and we talk about that. We come to a mutual understanding of where we are and where we want to go. Then we review our goals and objectives every three or four months to make sure everyone is on track. The same system applies in TO&E units, although it is focused more on the training, morale, esprit, and basic mission of the unit.

"What I look for in a leader is someone who knows his job, who relates to his soldiers and looks after them and their families, who cares, and who sets the example.

"Leaders are evident. They use initiative. They are aggressive and physically fit. But probably most of all, they are people who have common sense—and display it on a daily basis."