



Real Leadership: From the Front

Publisher's Note: I gave this speech at Tulane University on June 6, 2003, in honor of all veterans who had ever participated in a D-Day. Tom Blakey's story is a typical recollection of anything but typical heroism displayed by countless men that day. But, it describes a uniquely American approach to leadership, one for which we are all thankful. DG

At this precise moment fifty-nine years ago, Tom Blakey had been in Normandy for just about fourteen hours. You see, the twenty-four year old Texan was a member of the 82nd Airborne Division (Infantry). Fourteen hours earlier he had parachuted out of a C-47, an airplane carrying him and thousands of other young men just like him.

Tom was the platoon sergeant of first platoon, A company, 1st of the 505th Parachute Infantry Regiment (PIR), an airborne battalion of 1000 soldiers who had spent months training in England for this day.

The flight from England to Normandy was an uneventful one. Inside the aircraft the soldiers were quiet. Some ate their last meals, some prayed the rosary, others sat in silence and others tried to get what they knew would be the last sleep they would have for a long time. As the aircraft flew over the Normandy coast, it encountered a fog bank, making navigation for the pilot difficult and perilous. Army pathfinders, had parachuted in ahead of Tom's unit, their job was to mark the landing zones with radio beaconing devices as well as special lights that could be seen from the air.

However, as can happen in war, things go wrong. The effects of the fog bank, as well as fierce anti-aircraft fire caused seventeen of eighteen pathfinder teams to land in the wrong places—in effect—none of the following aircraft had their landing zones properly identified for their jumps.

Being the jumpmaster on his aircraft, Tom was responsible for ensuring that everyone on the aircraft exited the airplane. Once he saw the red light inside the aircraft come on he issued the order, "Stand up and hook up." The soldiers inside the aircraft stood up and clipped their parachute extraction cords to a wire running above their heads on either side of the aircraft. They all knew the moment they had been training for was very close. As he looked out of the exit door, Tom could see anti-aircraft fire coming up from the ground toward the plane. It was almost like watching a fireworks show—except these fireworks were deadly. This was perhaps the most frightening time for a paratrooper—the hopeless feeling of being shot at yet unable to do anything about it.

It was some time before the green, "go" light came on, but once it did, there was little hesitation on the part of the paratroopers in exiting the aircraft. All told, in the entire division there were only seven soldiers who refused to jump. Tom exited his aircraft, his chute deployed and he landed softly on the ground. The time was 0045 hrs., quarter to one in the morning, June 6, 1944. He had no idea where he was. He had a map, but the map didn't match the terrain he was on. He was alone, the soldiers he had jumped with were scattered over miles of Normandy. In the distance he could hear the thundering sounds of naval gun fire pounding the beachheads. Of greater concern to him—much closer, he could hear sporadic machine gun and small arms firing. He knew he had to do two things: figure out where he was *and* find his soldiers; and not get killed in the process. As the night continued, Tom hid in ditches whenever he knew the Germans were nearby, looking for the Americans. Along the way, he encountered two of his fellow soldiers: both were dead. They had not been as lucky as he was. It was almost by happenstance that Tom ran into other soldiers and by morning he had collected a group of seven soldiers, none of whom was under his command. Nevertheless, they continued to move toward their objective: the small village of St. Marcouf.

These American soldiers, most of whom had never seen combat before, disorganized and surrounded by the sounds of war, on a continent they had never been on before, with no one telling them what to do, were amazing that night. All over Normandy soldiers like Tom, who had landed alone, far from their designated landing zones, began to collect themselves, organize themselves, and move toward their objectives. By morning, there were thousands of groupings of soldiers making their way toward where they needed to be. Generals and colonels, used to commanding thousands of men led groups of privates. Privates, many of whom were only seventeen or eighteen years old, took action—they knew their mission.

Eventually, they found each other. Eventually they found their objectives. Eventually, they won the victory.

Tom talks about an interesting phenomenon as he describes the events of June 4, 1944. He talks about "every man knowing what he had to do, and doing it—and having the power to do it." Tom told me that on the 50th anniversary of the invasion, a former German army commander told him, "If I had had the authority you, as a platoon sergeant, had you would have never stayed on the beach that day." Perhaps that phenomenon is unique to the

American culture, but there can be little doubt that without that drive to achieve, the American Army would have been defeated in detail on June 6, 1944.

None of these men consider themselves heroes. In fact, I'm struck by the self-effacing nature of nearly all of them when I talk to them. They are quick to talk about the actions of others and reticent to speak of their own actions. It wasn't what "I did," they all say. It was what "we did" that mattered. When I asked Mr. Blakey to be my guest here this morning to honor him he respectfully declined. Instead, he continues to serve and today is at the D-day (now World War II) Museum, greeting and talking with visitors as they walk through the door. Make some time today and visit the museum, and ask for Tom Blakey.

Tom Blakey, and thousands of others, rescued Europe from the evil of Hitler with a journey that began in earnest on June 6, 1944, forty-nine years ago. We know the history, we know the results. Perhaps theirs was the greatest generation. But I believe there is something about us as a nation that is captured in Tom's story. Regardless of war or peace, it is this desire to achieve, this commitment to a set of national values that guide us that cannot go unnoticed. Tom Blakey and thousands of others like him, was leading from the front. Anytime anyone acts to achieve, to influence the actions of others, and does it with a sense of moral purpose, one is leading from the front. I hope you enjoy today's talk about what it means to lead, its importance, and how do we consider our roles as leaders