

EPILOGUE

Rank, Authority, and the Men Who Would Follow You Anywhere

I had written about heroes who were gone.

But on January 10, 2020, in Raleigh, North Carolina, I was watching one who was still becoming.

That day, my cousin—Major Neil E. Edgar—was promoted to Lieutenant Colonel. The ceremony was formal, proud, and deeply personal. A speaker summarized the long road: infantry, airborne, Iraq, Kosovo, the pivot to intelligence, the schools, the deployments, the missions, the badges and medals—an accumulated weight of competence that does not fit neatly into a paragraph.

And there was one presence in the room that mattered more than all of it.

Neil's father, WWII Navy veteran Seaman Second Class Howard Donald Edgar, Jr., age 92, stood there to pin the insignia on his son.

Ten days before that ceremony I had a full knee replacement in New Jersey. I had no business traveling. But I had made up my mind: there was no way in hell I was missing that moment.

So, I did what the men in my family have always done when something mattered: I showed up.

I slipped into that auditorium on crutches, unannounced. I stood behind a tall man speaking with my cousin—until he stepped aside and Neil saw me. The look on his face is something I will carry for the rest of my life. It was the first time I ever saw him cry.

I didn't put that scene in his main narrative the first time I wrote about it in his book because I didn't want the day to be about me. The day belonged to Neil and his father. But when you try to tell the truth about leadership, you eventually learn that you cannot edit out the raw parts just because they make you emotional. Sometimes the *human moment* is the evidence.

Another Raleigh Moment: The Blanket

After the ceremony, Neil asked if I would join him and some of his friends later for snacks and beers.

The honest-truth is that all I wanted was a dark hotel room and relief from the fire in my leg. But I also knew this: you don't turn down the invitation into a soldier's inner circle. Those evenings are where you learn what a man is *really* made of—because the uniform is off, the speeches are over, and what's left is character.

When I arrived, I discovered something I did not expect. Neil had talked about me to his friends many times before. He had read my father's book—cover to cover—more than once. And in that room were men and women who somehow seemed to know pieces of my own story better than I did.

Then Neil looked at me and said, simply, "Tell them the story about the blanket."

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That blanket had been one of my father’s quirks—an old Army blanket he kept in his car, always paired with the same lecture: “You should always have a warm blanket nearby... You never know!”

I didn’t understand that lecture as a kid. However, I understood it decades later—after my father was gone—when I finally learned what cold really meant to a man who had survived war as a POW.

So, I told Neil’s friends the blanket story – a gift given to a POW by the Red Cross, cherished as a means of survival and comfort, best friend during the bitter heatless winter months and a lifeline during a forced 400-mile march across Europe in the worst blizzard on record in January of 1945. Even with their blankets, many perished.

When I reached the part where that blanket was ultimately used to save the life of an accident victim four year after my father’s death, I was emotionally drawn back to that moment once again. And, lost in the mud and blood of the wreck site, when I recalled telling the emergency responders I didn’t need it back, my composure broke. Not a polite crack. A real one. In the blur of that moment twenty-one years prior, I had let go of something most precious.

Neil got up and hugged me.

The room went quiet in the way it only goes quiet when grown adults suddenly remember what matters.

And then the night ended. I went back to the hotel, and the pain returned like a blowtorch. The next morning, I limped through airports, got home, and paid the physical price for what I had chosen to do.

Ten days later, a box arrived from Neil and the North Carolina National Guard. Inside was a brand-new, itchy, pale-green U.S. Army blanket. And a note that said, in effect: *We know it will never replace your dad’s blanket... but maybe when you see it in your car, it will bring back good memories.*



That blanket was not a gift card. It was not a plaque. It was not a polite thank-you.

It was *emotional intelligence in physical form.*

And it told me something important about Neil’s leadership that I could not have learned from his résumé:

He notices people.

He remembers what matters to them.

And he acts—not for recognition, but because doing nothing would feel wrong.

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The Question Behind All of It

Watching Neil become a Lieutenant Colonel, and then watching the quiet reverence of his peers later that evening, forced a question I've wrestled with for years as a writer:

Why do some leaders inspire compliance... while others inspire belief?

Rank can compel obedience. But rank cannot compel reverence.

There is a difference between being followed because you can punish a man... and being followed because a man would step into fire with you.

Doolittle: Authority That Did Not Come from Eagles



By the time Jimmy Doolittle was a lieutenant colonel, he was already established in ways that mattered to aviators and combat men: a world-class pilot, an engineer, a test pilot, a man who had risked his life in the work long before he risked it in war.

When the Raiders volunteered for the WWII mission to bomb Tokyo, they understood it was dangerous and might be one-way.

The point isn't whether they believed the plan would succeed. The point is they believed Doolittle would not lie to them.

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That is the heart of it.

Leadership at the edge is not charisma. It is not volume. It is not theatrics.

It is trust.

And one of the clearest signals of that trust was that Doolittle did not place himself safely behind the line—he flew first.

The leader absorbed the risk up front, not as symbolism, but as proof.

That creates what soldiers recognize instantly: moral authority—the kind that cannot be ordered and cannot be faked.

The Modern Mirror: Knowlton and the Meaning of “Peer-Selected”



Neil’s story has its own modern echo of that same phenomenon, and it has a name: The LTC Thomas W. Knowlton Award.

Knowlton was an early American intelligence figure in the Revolutionary era. He was America’s first Intelligence professional and with Knowlton’s Rangers, gathered intelligence under

General Washington. The award was established by the Military Intelligence Corps Association in 1995 to recognize significant contributions to Army Military Intelligence.

But the real meaning is in the selection.

The Knowlton Award recognizes individuals whose contributions stand out in the eyes of superiors, subordinates, and peers, and who demonstrate integrity, moral character, and professional competence.

For Neil, being nominated by his peers and subordinates was a significant honor and a testament of their respect for his knowledge and leadership.

Neil himself reinforced that point plainly in an email to me: That award “meant a lot” because he was nominated by his subordinates—and he described it as a kind of lifetime achievement recognition within Army Intelligence.



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That is the bridge between Doolittle and Neil. Because lateral and subordinate respect is the rarest currency in any organization.

You cannot order it.

You cannot self-nominate for it.

You either earn it... or you don't.

Neil, In His Own Words: Inclusion, Intent, and the Future

There is another reason this Doolittle comparison works, and it comes straight from Neil's mouth—words that quietly reveal how he thinks.

In his email exchange, Neil writes that great leaders are visionaries who spend “75% of their time in the future and 25% of their time in the present,” and that as a leader it's his duty to give his team clear “vision, mission, task, purpose and end-state.”

Then he goes further—into what is recognized as mature leadership:

If he can remove obstacles, he can “lead by intent,” empower subordinates, and stay forward-focused; but he also acknowledges leadership is an art, and that a good leader must know when to be prescriptive based on mission complexity and the experience level of the Soldiers.

That is not “soft leadership.”

That is *competent leadership with human awareness*—the kind that treats Soldiers as thinking adults, respects the realities of fear and fatigue, and still demands excellence.

It is also why his philosophy of inclusion makes sense: not as sentimentality, but as operational strength—because the truth is that power lives everywhere in an organization, and any leader who forgets that eventually discovers it the hard way.

The Quiet Truth About Why Men Follow

So, here is the comparison I am willing to put in ink.

The men who followed Doolittle did not follow him because he wore Eagles.

They followed him because he had done the hard things himself—and because they believed he would not waste them.

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And the Soldiers who nominated Neil for a once-in-a-lifetime award did not do it because a chain of command required it.

They did it because they believed in him.

That is the part that does not come from rank.

That respect does not come from a promotion order.

It comes from a thousand daily acts that prove—quietly, repeatedly—what kind of man you are when nobody is watching.

And sometimes, if you are lucky, you see a small moment that reveals it all:

A lieutenant colonel, fresh from a ceremony, turning to his older cousin and saying,
“Tell them the story about the blanket.”

Because he knew the story mattered.

And he knew the people in that room needed to hear it.

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