

A Leader Larger Than Life

By 1stLt Aaron Ellis, USMC

Executive Editor's note: The following article received first place in the 2024 Leatherneck Magazine Writing Contest. The award is provided through an endowment by the Colonel Charles E. Michaels Foundation and is being given in memory of Colonel William E. Barber, USMC, who fought on Iwo Jima during World War II, and was the recipient of the Medal of Honor for his actions at the Battle of Chosin Reservoir during the Korean War. Upcoming issues of Leatherneck will feature the second- and third-place winners and honorable mentions entries.

In 2012, at the start of my freshmen year of high school, I was 5 feet, 11 inches tall and I weighed about 130 pounds. For those who may not have a good idea of what that looks like, try googling giraffe or mantis and you'll get the idea (for those of similar stature who are reading, we're all beautiful in our own ways). Because of this, I aligned myself more with that stereotypical clique of individuals that had an inclination for book smarts and fun facts than I did those who played football and knew how to talk to strangers without fumbling over their own name.

So, during the summer before the start of high school when my mom handed me a pamphlet about JROTC and I saw the pictures of all the people who I thought were shoo-ins to be the next batch of Navy SEALs, I was intrigued, but apprehensive. Certainly, there wasn't any way that a guy like me would have the personality, confidence or athleticism to be hanging around a bunch of guys and gals like that. And there certainly wasn't a way that I'd be able to make it through something as daunting and rigorous as a program like JROTC (you could say I view things a little differently in hindsight).

Nevertheless, for one reason or another, I decided I'd sign up and see what it was all about. I had always been interested in the military because of all my childhood hours playing video game staples like "Call of Duty" and "Battlefield," so this seemed like a natural way for me to dip my toes in the water of such a career path I suppose you could say, even if I didn't stay in the program for long.

I don't remember much from those first few days of JROTC class. Or more specifically, I don't remember much aside from one single thing: First Sergeant Leon Coleman, USA (Ret). It's



COURTESY OF 1STLT AARON ELLIS, USMC

1SG Leon Coleman, USA during his time as a JROTC instructor at Northwest Rankin High School, in Flowood, Miss., circa 2013. Coleman started his career in the Marine Corps and later transferred to the Army.

no wonder his existence occupied the entire presence of my mind, because for starters, he was massive. Compared to someone my size, he was Herculean. He would often sit in the back of class cracking open walnuts with his bare hands. At that time, I wouldn't have been surprised if someone had told me that he had a tendency to accidentally rip doorknobs straight from their doors. He had the voice of Zeus, but deeper and more intimidating. You could regularly hear him bellowing out the word "hero," often directed at someone who, in that present moment, happened to be doing something foolish or incorrect. One of his favorites, he would snipe students across the room by saying "cover that thing up, hero," if they yawned without

covering their mouths. His demeanor was one of confident military bearing, unphased by adversity and seemingly indifferent to struggle. During physical training sessions, he would calmly lead the pack without so much as a heavy breath or cough, and even when you were standing in formation with your eyes locked squarely at the point in front of you, you could just feel when his gaze was on you. Indeed, 1SG Coleman was quite the figure.

Despite my initial hesitation to get more involved, largely resulting from my fearful respect and intrigue surrounding 1SG Coleman, I quickly found myself participating in many of the extracurricular JROTC teams like drill, orienteering, physical training and marksmanship for a couple of reasons. For one, a 14-year-old without a driver's license doesn't have much to do after school. Second, one of my fellow classmates was quite affable and heavily involved in the program, on account of the fact that both of his older brothers had done/were doing JROTC as well. To my surprise, he and 1SG Coleman seemed to get along quite well from the get-go. I, however, was fairly new to the school after having moved to the area just a year earlier, so surely there was no way that I'd be on the same level of familiarity as the two of them, or so I thought.

With all these extra hours I spent taking part in JROTC, I ended up spending a lot of time with 1SG Coleman. In addition to instructing the freshmen class during school hours, he was at every drill practice meticulously critiquing every detail. He was at each meeting for the orienteering team, helping future privates and lieutenants become intimately familiar with losing track of pace counts. He was at all of the PT sessions, setting the example and building teams from the ground up. In all these extra hours with him, I—as did everyone else, it turned out—came to discover a much different 1SG Coleman than the one that was immediately perceived; the one that my fellow classmate apparently knew from day one. His immense strength became a firm, welcomed handshake and a pat on the back that somehow imbued you with a sense of confidence and pride

that must've somehow been buried deep within you mere moments before. His rich voice transformed into the most beautiful and moving cadences you could ever dream of, even after hearing the words countless times before. His resolute demeanor revealed an intent listener with boundless compassion that made you feel like what you had to say was the only thing at all that mattered in that moment, no matter how silly it may have felt. Indeed, 1SG was quite the role model.

During the privilege of my years spent learning from him, even after his retirement from JROTC toward my later years in high school (he would still regularly show up to events and ceremonies), I would come to respect and admire 1SG Coleman a great deal. While many of the lessons he taught me have long been forgotten, either because of their presence among countless other lessons he imparted, or because of the second-nature part of my character that they have become, the two I have consciously carried with me for over the last decade are this: 1) Everything comes down to discipline and passion; to do what you know you should or must, regardless of the circumstances or consequences; and to care—to spend yourself in a cause you deem worthy. 2) There's nothing more powerful than believing in your people.

First Sergeant Coleman was a tremendously successful leader because he cultivated, maintained and developed an immense sense of discipline and passion. By doing so, he set a venerable example for all of us to emulate, one that we wanted to emulate and *dreamed* of emulating. There needn't be any lessons



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While serving in the Marine Corps, then-PFC Leon Coleman at a Marine Corps Birthday Ball. Coleman imparted the lessons he learned during his time in the military to those he mentored during his time as a JROTC instructor.

on J.J. or buckle tying (although there certainly were as part of our standard curriculum) because he showed us day-in and day-out what it meant to be a leader.

Now, if “all” he had done was set the example for us and taught us, that would have been enough. But what made him a truly outstanding leader, what made him truly extraordinary, truly inspiring, uncommon, unforgettable—what made him truly and dearly ... *loved*, was his

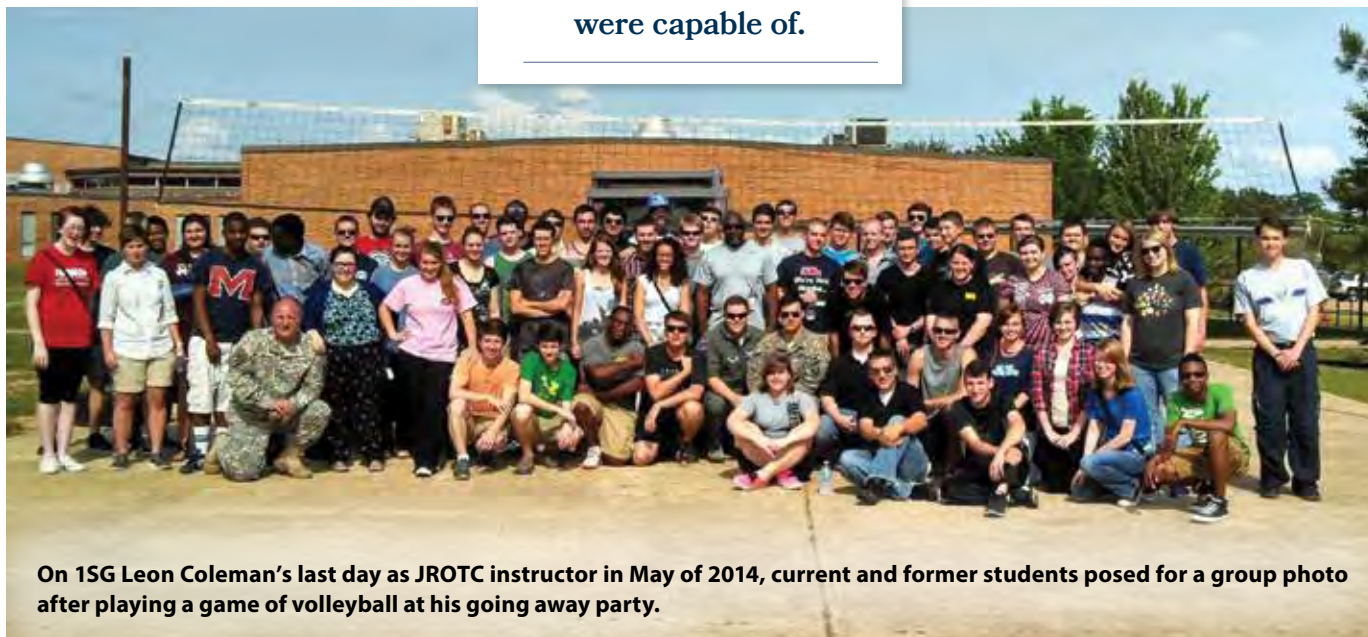
He saw the potential in us even when we didn't see it ourselves, and he expressed to each of us all the wonderful things he truly thought and felt we were capable of.

ability to see the potential in us and bring out the best in us. I've been extremely fortunate in my life to have grown up in an unconditionally nurturing family, but never before in my life had I come across someone who believed in me as much as my own parents, yet that's exactly what 1SG Coleman did for me and countless others. It was incredible.

Here was this remarkable man, that regardless of your background or personal beliefs or performance in school or even your care or apathy for JROTC itself, believed in you. He saw the potential in us even when we didn't see it ourselves, and he expressed to each of us all the wonderful things he truly thought and felt we were capable of. He cultivated, maintained and developed our sense of self-worth, even as difficult as that is for a group of people as malleable yet headstrong as teenagers, and thus showed us the discipline and passion that we were all capable of—the success that each of us were capable of.

Ninth grade Aaron Ellis would have never actually expected me to end up where I am now, as a Marine Corps officer, having completed and currently doing all of the things I never would have thought I was capable of. In many ways, I owe it to 1SG Coleman for where I am now. My trajectory from high school very likely wouldn't have been the same as it is today if it weren't for him. The only things we can control in life are our attitude and our effort; he taught me the importance of having the discipline to control them and the passion to make it meaningful.

As detailed by the *Leatherneck* solicitation for this essay, the prompt was to “describe an outstanding Marine Corps



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On 1SG Leon Coleman's last day as JROTC instructor in May of 2014, current and former students posed for a group photo after playing a game of volleyball at his going away party.



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from Dr. Suess of all people—that “to the world you may be just one person; but to one person you may just be the world.” An outstanding leader is something we can all actually be.

I hope that this essay accurately captures to some small degree the humble yet larger-than-life person that he was. He was a great man, but even more than that, he was a good man. I hope that I can honor his legacy by never forgetting the value of discipline and passion or the power of believing in others. I strive to live in a way that conveys this just as he did; and while I would say I hope that he would be proud of the person I am today, I can confidently and joyfully say that I know he would be—he was proud of all of us.

Author's bio: First Lieutenant Aaron Ellis is Deputy Director, Communication Strategy and Operations at MCAS Iwakuni, Japan. Ellis was commissioned after his 2020 graduation from the U.S. Naval Academy, where he earned a bachelor of science in aerospace engineering. In January 2021, Ellis reported to the Defense Information School, where he completed Public Affairs and Communication Strategy Qualification course as a distinguished graduate. In April 2021, Ellis reported to Marine Corps Air Station Iwakuni, Japan.

1SG Coleman had an outstanding rapport with his students, even when they weren't in the classroom. While sitting on a bus on the way to a class field trip, a JROTC student tried to sneak a photo of 1SG Leon Coleman as he passed by. He noticed and pointed at the student saying he “sees everything.”

leader and what makes him or her successful.” Sadly, 1SG Coleman passed away from cancer in late 2016 during my freshmen year of college and the beginning of my path to become a Marine, an achievement I really wish he could have seen. Some would say that this means it is more accurate to talk about what “made” him successful, but that couldn't be further from reality. His legacy lives on through everyone that had the honor of knowing him. The values he instilled in us are reflected in our interactions with others, especially that large group of us that has since gone on to join the military.

My last interaction with him was at a hospital, shortly before he passed. He told me that he loved me, and although I knew it, hearing it left me speechless and is a moment I'll never forget.

Thankfully, I was fortunate enough to be able to make it to his funeral and reminisce with numerous others about the times we shared with him and the lessons he imparted. It was a tangible example of the profound impact he had. Indeed, Leon Coleman was quite the leader.

We often hear about incredible leaders like Chesty Puller, John Glenn, Jim Mattis, Daniel Daly, Charlie Bolden, and many more. It can be hard to believe that people like this exist, or even yet, imagine what their day-to-day actions must be like. But then you meet someone like 1SG Coleman and you see firsthand what it means to be a truly great leader. You realize that outstanding leaders exist “down here” in real life, and not because they're famous or have performed some grandiose feat. They embody the idea—

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