

The Real Heroes

Lieutenant Colonel Michael D. Pyatt (U.S. Army, Retired)

Please excuse the ramblings of an old soldier but I have to tell the story straight. The Army and all of its experiences have been good to my family and me. A career in professional military music has had its rewards. Traveling to foreign countries, performing before heads of state, celebrating our soldiers in ceremony, and entertaining all who would hear us have been thrills of a lifetime. You see, “Pyatt, you’re just a West Texas boy that’s done good.” That was said to me by a Plainview, Texas friend many years after we graduated from high school. And you know, danged if he wasn’t right.

He did forget one important point. I did good things as a result of my West Texas music upbringing. I’ve always known but I never really thought about what it really meant to me until one day in rehearsal with the Army Ground Forces Band, Forces Command Headquarters, Fort McPherson, Georgia. I asked a bassoonist to please play a certain passage better in tone. The next time through was perfect. I asked what he had done to fix the problem and he told me that he merely played the passage with an alternate fingering. “Who taught you that fingering?” I asked, figuring he would say that his private instructor taught him. He stated that his high school band director taught him. Was he a bassoonist, too? “No,” was the reply. He was a percussionist that knew

his responsibilities to his students was to know about all of the instruments. WHAM! Right between the eyes. It hit me. I was one of the luckiest men alive. I was in charge of 65 of the most professional musicians in the world. We would perform on the average of 1.5 performances a day. That left no room for fixing technical problems in rehearsals. Many times we didn’t have a rehearsal and performed from sight. And you know, we all have the same background. We started playing our instruments in elementary or middle school. What I had in front of me were the ones that “got it” and wanted to make a career out of being the best musicians in the world. The real heroes were the professional music educators that sowed the seeds that inspired these professionals to be the best.

My career would not be possible without public and private music education. It is the elementary, middle and high school band directors that are the real heroes of this story. Teaching young people to push the right button at the right time and produce a pleasing sound takes patience, tons of patience. It takes character to meet individual student’s needs—to inspire them to want to do better as individuals and ultimately as a team. Anyone can learn music, but it takes a rare breed to successfully teach and inspire young people to be the very best.

They want to do their best because they are a part of something bigger than themselves. By not doing their best, they would somehow let the team down, let the director down, let the school down, let the community down. It is the band director that motivates the students to want to be the best and to instill pride in doing their best at all times—no exceptions. It is the preparation by the band director that makes rehearsals inspirational. It is the band director that makes these kids want to come back for more. Why? Simply, it is fun to win. It is fun to be recognized for being the best. It is fun to be a part of something worthwhile. The band director does this and it takes a lot of hard work and time to achieve results. Understanding and caring for what you do are important ingredients for success. Most importantly, genuine love for what you do is the key to success.

From the moment I met my future high school band director I knew I wanted to be just like him. I still do. He started me out in grade school on the cornet while he was the middle school band director. When I got to middle school he was promoted to high school and I had an equally talented and inspirational middle school band director. The common factor between these two incredible teachers was *excellence at all times*. Period. I was scared to

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death that if I didn't do my best all of the time, I would let them down. I wanted to work as hard as they did. They wanted to be the best so I did too. We started with the fundamentals until they were second nature. We rehearsed these over and over again until we were sick of them. The reason was that you build upon what you have just learned. You keep this up and over time you learn what excellence means. Excellence builds traditions and traditions build reputations. I was lucky enough to be a part of a tradition of excellence in bands from the beginning of Plainview's music program. By the time I got to high school being a member of the Plainview High School Band was an honor. The whole town knew what that meant. If you were a part of the band you had instant credibility of being an excellent person. It felt good to be good. My high school band director instilled this in my teammates and me. We still love him for this. We always will.

My point is that the band director is responsible for inspiration and commitment. Hard work and planning is not enough. You have to want to be good before you can be good. The leadership expressed by the band director is paramount. I learned the definition of leadership by watching my band directors. I wanted to do well because I *wanted* to—not because I had to. They gave me the opportunity to be the very best. It was up to me to accept or reject this opportunity. I choose to accept it. I am what I am today because of my experiences with my middle and high school band directors. They saw something in me; they saw something in everybody. They encouraged us to seek individual excellence by taking private lessons, going to band camps, and trying out for contests. They pushed us in a way that didn't turn us off to hard work. They showed us the benefits of hard work and that hard work was worth it. They taught us a work ethic that stays with us today. I feel I am always a part of something bigger than myself. I must be the best I can to help my family and organization be the best.

I will always be grateful to my middle and high school band directors. I will never be able to repay them for what they inspired in me.

Every single person I've encountered in my professional military musical career has the same story I just told. No matter what state they came from they have the same story. Some band director lit the fire of desire under them and they are what they are because of these professionals. I personally conducted or was a part of over four thousand performances and witnessed by over one hundred live (and one million in broadcast) audience members throughout my career as a professional band director. These performances were actually allowed because somewhere in this great country of ours middle and/or high school public music educators planted and cultivated the seed of musical desire in each of the musicians I have had the privilege of conducting. We were able to do our job because public and private music educators did theirs. Thank you from the bottom of my heart. To Texas public music educators: O. T. Ryan (my high school band director and mentor); Wayne Griggs (my middle school band director); J. W. King, Harris Brinson, J. R. McEntyre, Bill Woods, Dr. Gary Garner (band camp directors and clinicians); Richard Tolley, Robert Mays, David Ritter (my trumpet instructors); Dean Killion, John P. Paynter (my college band directors); and countless others—thank you. I will never truly be able to adequately repay you for what you did for me. You are the REAL HEROES!

Lieutenant Colonel Michael D. Pyatt (U.S. Army, retired) has recently retired from the U.S. Army after 26 active years. He served with the Armed Forces School of Music; The U.S. Army Field Band; The Army Ground Forces Band; The U.S. Army Band and Chorus, Europe; and various administrative positions. He received his Bachelor's degree in trumpet performance from Texas Tech University and his Masters of Music degree in instrumental conducting from Northwestern University. Retiring to Schertz, Texas he and his wife, Patti, enjoy the San Antonio climate, golfing, and fishing. He currently works part time with the Texas Bandmasters Association.