

VICTORY PRINCIPLES

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Leadership Lessons from D-Day

Col. Leonard Kloeber, Jr.



New York

Victory Principles

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SPECIAL DEDICATION

To my father, Cpl. Leonard Kloeber, Sr., who served in a US Army Air Corps special ground reconnaissance unit in North Africa and Burma; and to my father-in-law, 1 Lt. John D. Garvik, who served with the Fifth Rangers and landed on Omaha Beach on D-Day with the US 29th Infantry Division, 115th Infantry Regiment. He was killed in action on June 12, 1944 in Normandy, France. Their service in World War II is a personal inspiration for this book.



Dedication

This book is dedicated to the Soldiers, Sailors, and Airmen who took part in what General Eisenhower called the "Great Crusade." Their story of personal courage, sacrifice, and ultimate victory has forever earned them an honored place in history. A special dedication is made to those, both military and civilian, who paid the ultimate sacrifice as a part of the tragedy that is war. May their souls forever rest in peace.

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INTRODUCTION

On June 6, 1944, the English Channel was churning with six-foot swells and whitecaps despite a break in the stormy weather of the previous day. Based on limited information, the Supreme Commander Allied Forces Europe, General Dwight D. Eisenhower, had just made the difficult decision to proceed with the invasion despite the unfavorable weather conditions. The breaking dawn revealed the largest armada ever assembled, over five thousand warships, transports, and assault vessels. The D-Day invasion of the Normandy coast of France was underway. It officially began just after midnight, with airborne infantry dropping behind the beaches to secure key terrain, disrupt the German defense, and cause general confusion around the landing areas. At about 0630 hours, the first waves of Allied assault troops waded onto the beaches after intense air and naval bombardments. It was a pivotal moment in history and a high-risk venture to secure an Allied foothold on the European continent. The mission of the Allied forces was to open up the Western Front against the German Third Reich, liberate occupied France, and defeat the Nazi Army.

Amphibious assaults are always high-risk ventures because the invaders are extremely vulnerable while they secure a beachhead and get adequate forces and supplies onshore. Until this is accomplished, they are highly exposed to a counterattack that can drive them back into the sea. That was the plan of the German commander, Field Marshal Erwin Rommel. Fortunately for the Allies, he was away from France at the time of the attack and the Germans were slow to react. Nevertheless, the assault was still an extremely arduous undertaking, and the German forces in France fought fiercely to defend their turf. Overcoming numerous obstacles and significant casualties, the Allies successfully accomplished their objectives and thus began the campaign to drive on to Germany and bring World War II in Europe to an end.

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The epic story of D-Day has been well chronicled over the years since the war ended. The first accounts were recorded by unit “after action reports,” official Army historians, and journalists at the time. Later historians have written numerous books and articles on every aspect of the Normandy battles. Hundreds of movies and documentaries have since portrayed the events. Some of these accounts focus on specific aspects of the battle or various unit actions. Other accounts focus on the overall campaign or the larger-than-life personalities of the generals. Many of these are well-researched versions of the story supported by actual eyewitness reports and archived official documents.

So why do we need yet another book on D-Day? What more can be told about these events that has not already been told? What else can be researched and discovered that has not already been uncovered by the diligent historians whose studies have lasted longer than the events themselves? These are logical questions one might ask when one goes to a bookstore or library and discovers the rows of books on the subject already in print.

The answer is easy. This is not just another book that simply retells the story. This book is written as a “Staff Ride.” Staff Rides are a way of studying historical accounts and drawing lessons for the present. The Staff Ride technique was first developed by the Prussian Army as a way to train general staff officers. Count Helmuth von Moltke, the nineteenth-century Prussian general and military theorist, used the Staff Ride concept to develop his staff officers by visiting actual European battle sites to discuss what happened and learn lessons for the future. It was later adopted by the U.S. Army.

In the early 1900s, the U.S. Army used the Staff Ride technique to study the engagements of the American Civil War. Students from the Command and General Staff Officer School visited the sites of Gettysburg, Sherman’s March to the Sea, and First Bull Run after studying about these events in the classroom. The study phase that preceded the actual site visits was preparation to understand what the commanders intended and what actually took place. The critical objective was

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to understand how lessons learned could be applied to future battles. Much of the focus centered on leadership lessons so that aspiring officers could learn how to lead soldiers in the stressful and chaotic context of battle. A wise old army dictum says that “no plan survives the first contact with the enemy.”

Successful leaders need to understand how to apply lessons from history to future events. When leaders find themselves in circumstances that require decisions based on limited information or in the “fog of war,” it helps to know how other leaders made decisions in similar circumstances. When decisions are time constrained, as they usually are, it helps to know what other leaders did to achieve success. The Staff Ride is an attempt to draw out these lessons learned through study, reflection, and discussion. It is an attempt to understand how general principles can be applied in the future, even under different circumstances.

Thus, *VICTORY Principles* is not simply another version of the events that took place in 1944. Although it begins with an overview of what happened, it is about why things happened as they did and, most important, what can be learned from what happened. It is not simply a detailed chronological telling of the events, although some of the story needs to be told in order to provide context for the readers. The story of Operation Overlord, the code name for the Allied invasion of Europe, is recounted with enough detail to highlight significant lessons learned. Numerous other books have been written to tell the tale of this epic event in much greater detail. This Staff Ride points to those pertinent parts of the story that contain leadership lessons. These lessons are forged in the context of a military campaign but are relevant for all students of the art of leadership.

This Staff Ride is also more than just a study of military history for professional military officers. It is intended for leaders or would-be leaders from all walks of life. As you read about the story of D-Day, ask yourself some of these questions:

- How do these events of over sixty years ago have any relevance today?

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- Can leadership lessons from these events transcend armed conflict and be applied to business or other endeavors?
- Can we use this story as a metaphor for other challenges in life?
- What general principles can be learned and applied in future circumstances?

I believe that as a participant on this Staff Ride, you will discover leadership lessons that were learned many years ago under the almost unimaginable circumstances of desperate life and death combat. I also believe that these leadership lessons are not just for the military, but are universal and can be applied to all leadership endeavors. It is sometimes said that “what is past is prologue.” It is also our best teacher.

My personal journey in the study of military history began even before I entered the U.S. Military Academy. As a high school student, I was intrigued by the writings of Caesar as he described his campaigns in Gaul during the time of the Roman Republic. And although we studied “Military Art,” as the history classes were called at West Point, it was not until I entered the army as an officer that I developed a deep interest in the study of military history as part of my professional development. It was only after I became a senior officer and then an executive at a large corporation that I really appreciated the lessons learned and began to apply them with varying degrees of success.

The lessons that I have chosen are simply a collection of those that appeared for me based on my experiences as an officer, executive, and leader. I use the acronym VICTORY to help make the lessons easier to remember. Although some of the lessons are related to military leadership, they are not intended to make you an expert in the art of war. Some people may question whether these lessons have wider application; you can decide for yourself whether they will enhance your capabilities as a leader.

After each chapter, I have included questions for a Staff Ride Notebook. One lesson that I have learned over the years is the benefit of keeping a personal leadership journal. I have used it to capture my

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thoughts and reflections on leadership from my own experiences. I would recommend that you complete your answers to these questions in such a notebook.

Readers who are familiar with the story of D-Day may identify different lessons from those that I have selected when they reflect on these events. The stories and lessons from June 1944 are as varied as the thousands of D-Day participants, and this Staff Ride could not possibly cover all of them. I hope that reading *VICTORY Principles* may spark your interest in the study of history. You might choose to read more about some aspect of this story by selecting one of the references in the bibliography. If I can simply frame the discussion for learning, then my mission has been accomplished.

Finally, I apologize in advance for any factual errors. In some cases, various authorities differ on what really happened. This would be an expected outcome in the “fog of war.” Where discrepancies exist, I have made an effort to point them out. Although I have attempted to make sure that the facts for the discussion are accurate and supported by references, any errors in details are mine alone. I trust that these errors, if any, will not detract from the overarching lessons themselves that supersede the finer details of the specific events.

I have always been intrigued by the events of World War II and, in particular, those of D-Day. The sheer scope and size of the invasion along with the personal courage of the participants makes this a truly amazing story. After many rewarding years of personal study and reflection, I offer you the opportunity to learn along with me from history.

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