

# Driving with the eighth SMA

By Robert Holtzhauer

*Editor's note: Before he became the 8th sergeant major of the Army in 1987, then-Command Sgt. Maj. Julius "Bill" Gates was the command sergeant major for the 3rd Infantry Division (Mechanized) in Germany. Here, Holtzhauer recalls learning much from Gates while serving as his driver.*

As I waited at the in-processing center in Germany for my next duty assignment in the early 1980s, I was approached by the NCO in charge, who asked if I'd be interested in driving for the 3rd Infantry Division command sergeant major. Of course, I replied, "Yes!" The NCOIC interviewed me, and then came Command Sgt. Maj. Julius "Bill" Gates.

During the interview, which lasted more than an hour, I gathered that I would be working for a no-nonsense Soldier who was straightforward. He was a U.S. Army Soldier, and I was now the driver for the 3ID command sergeant major — the highest enlisted Soldier of an 18,000-Soldier division, "Rock of the Marne." I was honored.

Routinely, I would do physical training with Gates, running by his side, both of us in flak vests at 5 a.m. We always did PT with one of the division companies each morning. Gates was in great shape, and during a 3-mile run, I looked at him and said, to myself, "This is exactly where I want to be." I wanted to be next to a leader, a teacher, a Soldier.

After PT, I took a shower, dressed, ate chow and was at the office by 6:45 a.m. Gates was already there! I never beat him to work, and to this day, I can't figure out how he did it. I was quick, but Gates was always quicker. The early morning routine normally was the same, but the daily routine changed depending on the mission. No day was the same. Each day had a different mission, and his job was to accomplish the mission.

I had a desk right outside his office. Besides being his driver, I helped with administrative duties. I made copies, mailed correspondence, ran errands delivering military manuals, and also inspected various areas for him. One of the inspection areas was called the "Snack Bar Inspection." Every morning at 7:30 a.m., I had notebook and pen in hand. I crossed the street from the division headquarters and entered the snack bar. I was to take down the names of any Soldiers in the snack bar, because Soldiers were

supposed to be in the motor pool or training at that time. After a few days of the chain of command answering to Gates why their Soldiers were in the snack bar at 7:30 a.m., the snack bar became deserted. It was later defined as "no-man's land."

It didn't take long for me to find out that others had nicknamed Gates "Mad Max." Where they got the "Max" part, I'll never know. But we all know, as a leader, when you encounter Soldiers not doing what they're supposed to do, you get mad. Our mission in Germany was none other than to "prepare for war." It was the mission we had then, and it's the same mission today.

The secret is simple: Train. You can't prepare for war if you're drinking coffee in the snack bar, and Gates knew this. If you didn't know, you would soon find out. From private to brigade sergeant major, you'd soon find out, officers, too. If you were a lieutenant, you'd have his respect as an officer, but if you weren't doing what you're supposed to be doing, he'd respectfully let you know, and your chain of command, too.

I'd get knocks at my barracks from the charge of quarters at 2 a.m., with instructions to report to division headquarters in 20 minutes. We would drive to Aschaffenburg and walk into a few company headquarters to inspect the arms room guard, who had better be awake and reading a military manual. Next, we'd head to Schweinfurt to inspect a CQ. We'd stop the vehicle, and Gates would get out, look around, and point, "I want to go there." The barracks better be secure and all night-duty personnel awake and studying military manuals.

I remember at least a dozen times, while we were driving, he saw division trucks with covers flapping in the wind, drivers smoking, track commanders sleeping, not following the proper distance, or other things that didn't look professional. He'd pull the entire convoy off the road until everything was corrected. He was also a stickler for safety. Ground guides for vehicles had to stand off to the side, not in front or behind the vehicle, in case the driver accidentally hit the accelerator too hard. If convoys were pulled over on the side of the road for a maintenance check, the sergeant better be instructing personnel to check the oil and water and ensure the vehicle was in tip-top shape. While all this went on, Soldiers better be in proper military uniform the entire time.

During field exercises, I'd drive him from one area to the next. He was always inspecting Soldiers and talking with NCOs. He firmly believed that the NCO is the backbone of the Army. If

you didn't have a decent sergeant, you wouldn't have a decent squad. If you weren't an acceptable sergeant, you would no longer be a sergeant.

During many field exercises, it rained, and we slept in the rain just like the other Soldiers. Sometimes, during mock battle exercises, high-ranking officers would sleep in quarters or eat dinner served on fine china. Not him. Gates didn't like being among "the rich and famous." He insisted that whatever the enlisted Soldier was going through, we would too. Gates setting the example was a training opportunity — training me for war, being my sergeant and preparing me, just like he insisted the sergeant train the private for war.

I recall a few close calls during field exercises when Gates would actually go and seek out the enemy positions. Once, we were surrounded by the enemy in a town during a mock battle, and he got us out of there. Here's the division command sergeant major on the front line seeking the enemy!

Inspections were big in our division. Every few weeks, we'd go to a company or battalion and have an all-day, in-depth inspection where results were recorded. A negative outcome would affect your military career. I learned a great deal during these inspections. I stood next to him during dress uniform inspections, recording every "gig," but also the positive remarks. It took over two hours to inspect a company during a dress inspection. If a Soldier's awards or ribbons were crooked on the uniform, then his feeling was the Soldier couldn't follow simple instructions and abide by set regulations. Then we would inspect the barracks. That's where I, as a sergeant, learned the most from Gates. The inspections were in-depth again but were meant to find out if a Soldier or the NCOs were prepared for war.

How could a barracks inspection define if a Soldier were prepared for war? Well, let's say your socks were rolled up nicely in the drawer, displayed for all to see. He'd unroll that sock, slide his hand into it, and if he found a hole, you'd fail. Why? If you go to war wearing socks with holes, you're going to get blisters on your foot, which means you can't walk 15 miles to the objective, and we lose a Soldier because of unserviceable socks. He would have Soldiers try on their helmets. If it didn't have a head band, then how the heck are you going to wear a helmet during war?

Those are just a few areas where a simple inspection really made an impact. The blame for failure went to the sergeant, not the private. Gates believed the sergeant's job is to prepare the squad for war, which made me think that being a Soldier and surviving on the battlefield was more than a display by some nations that rolled out their military hardware in a parade. A U.S. Army sergeant has to look deeper to prepare Soldiers for the "what-ifs." NCOs have to train, inspect and take care of Soldiers, as well as prepare them for war.

Besides my family, no other person has influenced my life like Gates did. His integrity, courage, discipline, loyalty, respect and values are traits that are now part of my personality. Even to this day, my co-workers, friends and family members still think I'm a sergeant, and it's been more than 25 years since I got out.

After Gates left to become the command sergeant major of the U.S. Army Sergeants Major Academy, Fort Bliss, Texas, I went to Fort Irwin, Calif., and was the training NCO of Headquarters Company, 1st Battalion, 63rd Armor Regiment. I later

rose to the position of platoon sergeant, as an E-5 at 27 years old.

It was a platoon of undertrained, unfit, uncaring Soldiers with half the vehicles broken at any given time. I placed into effect "Operation Uphill," where I used all the training I received from Gates. And it worked. After a few months, I received a "Special" Enlisted Evaluation Report for turning around a badly run platoon and making it combat-ready in a month. I owe this achievement to Gates. He trained me.

In 1984, Gates wrote in my Enlisted Evaluation Report that I was "the most dedicated, loyal, and professional noncommissioned officer that [he had] served with during [his] tenure in the military." The only reason I was any of those things was because he trained me. He trained me like he trained all Soldiers he's ever come in contact with.

I relish the time I spent with him. He developed me not only as a Soldier, but also as a productive member of society. He has been a credit to the U.S. Army in a way that most people don't know — not because he rose to be the sergeant major of the Army, but because he made such an impact on the Soldiers he trained to win at war.

*Robert Holtzhauer served on active duty from 1976 to 1988 as an IIC indirect fire infantryman. He worked for Gates from 1982 to 1985. He currently resides in northern Virginia.*



Gates served as a first sergeant at Fort Stewart, Ga., from 1977 to 1978.

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