

CHAPTER 1

Maintain Absolute Integrity

What quality is most universally prized among those who lead others under demanding circumstances in combat, or in business? In simple terms, it's integrity: adherence to a set of values that incorporate honesty and freedom from deception. But integrity is more than honesty. It means doing the right thing regardless of circumstances or inconvenience to the leader or the organization. Our leaders and teachers sometimes waver, as General Colin Powell (who fought there) says of Vietnam: "Our senior officers knew the war was going badly. Yet they bowed to groupthink pressure and kept up pretenses, the phony measure of body counts, the comforting illusion of secure hamlets, the inflated progress reports. As a corporate entity, the military failed to talk straight to its political superiors or to itself."¹

Far better that they and we listen to men of integrity such as Thomas Jefferson, who gave the following warning: "He who permits himself to tell a lie often finds it much easier to do it a second and third time, till at length it becomes habitual; he tells lies without attending to it, and truths without the world believing him.

This falsehood of the tongue leads to that of the heart, and in time depraves all its good dispositions.”²



Major Clay McCutchan was an air commando and pilot of an AC-130 gunship in the Air Force Reserve. Extensively modified with side-firing guns and the latest acquisition electronics, the AC-130 was a formidable aircraft. It could loiter for long periods of time until needed. When called upon, it could provide unparalleled firepower to destroy most targets in areas where the ground defenses were not too heavy.

In December 1989, McCutchan and his crew were one of two Air Force Reserve crews who volunteered to relieve an active duty AC-130 crew assigned to Panama during the Christmas holidays. They had done this three times before. What McCutchan and others didn't know was that the decision to invade Panama and capture dictator Manuel Noriega had been made a few days earlier by President Ronald Reagan. The invasion, called Operation Just Cause, was set to begin the night of December 19, 1989, only two days after McCutchan's arrival.

The objectives of Operation Just Cause were to capture Noriega and return him to the United States to stand trial on drug charges. The Air Commandos—or Air Force Special Operations, as it was now called—were to spearhead the invasion. Active-duty gunship crews had practiced for months at firing at and destroying mock-ups of certain predesignated targets. Since McCutchan's crew had not participated in this training, they were given a different mission. His crew was put on standby alert to guard Howard Air Force Base in the Canal Zone and the Panama Canal itself, in case it came under attack.

When no attack against the base came, they were ordered into the air to respond, if called upon, to help friendly troops fighting on the ground. For some time they flew around without a specific

assignment. At length they were sent to another airfield to aid a group of civilians who had been immobilized by a sniper. A few rounds from their 40mm guns took care of that problem. Again they flew around, waiting for a new job. Finally, McCutchan and his crew were ordered to attack three enemy armored cars along the Fort Amador Causeway. They made radio contact with the Forward Air Controller (FAC) on the ground right away. (The FAC's job is to control all friendly air strikes in his assigned area.) After they had located the armored cars, the controller told them, "You're cleared to take them out."

As McCutchan prepared to fire, his sensor operator and fire-control officer (FCO) spotted thirty to forty troops coming out of the jungle. The FCO called the controller on the ground and told him about the arrival of these new forces. "Take them out too; they're not ours," said the controller. In the AC-130A that McCutchan flew, the pilot fired the guns using a thumb trigger. As his thumb began to itch in readiness, his crew studied the situation closely using special sensors.³ The more they looked, the more convinced they became that these new troops were Americans. McCutchan had just positioned his airplane for the attack, when one of his crew stopped him: "Don't fire, they may be friendly!"

McCutchan took his thumb off the trigger. After talking it over with his crew, he called the FAC on the ground again and told him that they had identified the troops with the vehicles as possibly American.

"Negative, negative, they are not friendlies. They are enemy, and you are cleared to fire," the controller responded, the frustration clear in his voice. By now the FAC was excited. "Shoot, shoot, shoot," he intoned.

McCutchan called his command post back at Howard Air Force Base and briefed them on the situation. He asked for positive confirmation before firing. After several minutes the command post duty officer came back with a decision. "These are confirmed enemy. You are ordered to fire."

Now McCutchan's actions were no longer discretionary. He had been given a direct order. He had also been given the supreme test of integrity. He and his crew believed that the troops near the enemy vehicles were friendly. Usually the FAC on the ground had a much better picture of what was going on. But with the AC-130's sophisticated equipment, the crew might be in a better position to judge whether the troops were friendlies or enemies. "Our forces were not being fired on by these vehicles or these troops, and they were not an immediate threat to anyone," reasoned McCutchan. "If they were enemy and they lived, it would make little difference to the war. But if they were friendly and we killed them, we could never bring them back to life."

Clay McCutchan told the controller he was leaving the area to return to base. He was not going to fire. "I was convinced I was going to get court-martialed because three times I disobeyed a direct order to fire," he told me. The commander met them as they landed at dawn. "You're either a hero or in a lot of trouble," he told McCutchan.

McCutchan spent a sleepless morning despite his fatigue. He had been up all night and in the air almost six hours. By noon the whole story came down from higher headquarters. Contact had been made with the troops surrounding the vehicles. McCutchan and his crew had been right: the troops were American Special Operations troops who had captured the enemy armored vehicles. They had been unsuccessful in contacting anyone by radio to identify themselves. McCutchan and the others on his crew were awarded medals for having the moral courage—the integrity—not to fire, even when ordered to do so.

Typical of an outstanding leader of integrity, McCutchan gave full credit to those he led. "My crew was very experienced. I was only an average pilot, but my copilot had 1,500 hours of combat in Vietnam. All of my officers and noncommissioned officers were very experienced and absolutely top-notch. It was my sole

responsibility to make this decision, but I could not have made the decision I did if I did not trust them completely.”⁴

McCutchan may or may not have been an average pilot. But the Air Force recognized that he was a far-above-average leader—a leader of integrity. Some years later Clay McCutchan became a major general.

Lose Your Integrity, Lose Your Career

The Center for Creative Leadership in Greensboro, North Carolina, conducted a groundbreaking study to identify traits or behaviors associated with eventual success or failure of top executives.⁵ The researchers surveyed top managers and senior human resource executives. They gathered descriptions of twenty-one junior managers who had advanced into the ranks of middle or top management but had failed to perform successfully. These executives had been on the fast track, but they had all derailed. They were fired, opted for early retirement, or simply were never promoted again.

The researchers also obtained descriptions of twenty managers who had made it all the way to the top, and analyzed the two sets of descriptions to identify the similarities and differences between the failed and successful managers. Then they analyzed the extent to which various flaws were likely to derail a promising career. One major difference they uncovered was that those managers who were extremely successful were much more likely to have demonstrated strong integrity. Derailed managers were far more likely to have advanced their own careers at the expense of others. They were more likely to have betrayed a trust or broken a promise. An example given in the study was that of an executive who didn’t implement a decision as promised. This caused conflicts and affected four levels of frustrated executives below him. These managers’ failure didn’t require major lapses in integrity of the sort

that emerged at Enron or that contributed to the financial crisis of 2008 or that involved out-and-out fraud. Their slips were very basic. Yet they terminated many successful careers. Integrity is a fundamental law of Heroic Leadership in and out of the military.

No Cut-Off Date, No Limit Price

If you say something, make certain it is the exact truth. If you later realize you have misspoken, correct yourself. If you say you will do something, make certain you do it, no matter what.

Leonard Roberts became CEO of Arby's at a time when the business was doing very poorly. He turned the corporation around when sales had been falling 10 to 15 percent a year. He did this by promising service and support to Arby's franchisees with help and money. He delivered, and the franchisees supported him in turn. Sales soared.

Roberts was appointed to the board of directors. The first meeting he attended lasted fifteen minutes. The board was simply a rubber stamp for the owner. Eager for more profits, Arby's owner threatened to withdraw the help Roberts had given the franchisees. Moreover, bonuses earned by Roberts's staff would not be paid. Roberts immediately resigned from the board. The owner retaliated by firing Roberts for supporting the franchisees. But Roberts's sacrifice was not in vain. The integrity that he showed benefited the organization he left behind.⁶

Roberts went right into another situation calling for absolute integrity and Heroic Leadership. He was offered the position of chairman and CEO of Shoney's, a chain of two thousand restaurants headquartered in Nashville, Tennessee. The situation looked right, so Roberts accepted the offer. Only afterward did he learn that Shoney's was the subject of the largest racial discrimination lawsuit in history. Questioned by the *Wall Street Journal*, Roberts promised that the suit would be settled without long-term impact

on the company. Unfortunately, this was more easily said than done. The case was not some kind of misunderstanding: the policy of the chairman was not to hire African-Americans. Moreover, he fired any restaurant manager who did! “The settlement of that suit was the thing I am most proud of in my life,” says Len Roberts. “The former chairman agreed to pay up and settle. This saved the company. But I had to agree to resign after he did so. This was my second time out of work in almost as many years. My stand on integrity was getting kind of hard on my wife and kids. However, I knew it had to be done. There was no other way.”

Roberts became the CEO of RadioShack after leaving Shoney's. A year after that he took on the additional job as CEO of the entire Tandy Corporation. This began a ten-year career of success with many honors. *Brandweek* magazine even named him Retail Marketer of the Year. Roberts says, “You cannot fake it—you must stand up for what is right regardless. You cannot maintain your integrity until it hurts your pocketbook or risks your job. You cannot maintain your integrity 90 percent and be a successful leader—it's got to be 100 percent.”⁷

Pursue the “Harder Right”

As a young Air Force lieutenant in 1960 I was a new navigator on a B-52 crew. Among my responsibilities were two air-to-ground “cruise” missiles nicknamed “Hound Dogs.” The missiles were also new and still had many problems that hadn't yet been solved; during simulated launch and impact they frequently didn't hit the target. We couldn't actually launch these highly sophisticated missiles. That would have cost tens of millions of dollars each in today's money. Instead, on practice runs I spent several hours programming the missiles and updating them with my navigational data so that their computers knew where they were within feet.

When we were about fifteen minutes from the target, I put the missile into a simulated launch mode. The pilots followed a special needle indicator on their consoles. If the needle turned right, the pilots turned the aircraft right; if the needle turned left, they turned the aircraft left. When they did this, the aircraft followed a course to the target according to information in the missile's inertial guidance system. A few seconds from the target the radar navigator turned on a tone signal. On the ground, a Ground Control Intercept (GCI) site tracked the aircraft on radar. At the point where the missile would have dived into its target, the missile automatically interrupted the tone signal. The course the missile would have taken to the ground once it started its final dive was based on predetermined factors. So when the tone signal stopped, the GCI site, plotting the aircraft's radar track and knowing the missile's ballistics, could easily calculate where the missile would have hit if it had actually been launched. The missile's accuracy generally depended on the accuracy of the information the navigator gave its computer during programming. These practice runs had a major impact on the crews' careers. Crews that got good scores, got promoted. Those that did not were held back.

My crewmates were all far more experienced than I was. My aircraft commander was a lieutenant colonel. All the other officers were senior. All were veterans of World War II or Korea; some, of both wars. We had never flown with missiles. One day, while we were on seven-day alert, the aircraft commander called the crew together. "We have missiles for the first time," he said. "I don't want to discuss it. We're going to cheat to make sure we get good scores. All I want to know is how we're going to do it."

I was shocked speechless. This went against everything I had been taught at West Point or in my limited time in the Air Force. The radar navigator spoke up. "That's easy. Don't follow the missile needle. I'll figure out an adjustment for the ballistics, and I'll 'bomb' the target using my bombsight. All you have to do is follow the bombsight's needle as we normally do. The GCI site will not

know that we're actually bombing the target because we activate a tone in the same way as with the missiles."

We had three days of crew rest before getting together to plan the mission that would involve the twelve-hour flight with the missiles. The mission would include some regular bomb runs, some navigation and bomb runs at low level, an aerial refueling, a celestial navigation leg—and the simulated missile launch. The three days were absolute hell. I was new to the crew and the squadron but had heard rumors that this type of cheating was not unusual due to the extreme competition for promotion. Now I was being ordered to cheat with the very missiles with which I was entrusted. I talked it over with several other young lieutenants. They told me not to rock the boat. They said this sort of thing was not unusual and that everybody did it. If I didn't cheat occasionally, they said, it would be the end of my career.

I had worked long and hard for my career. I had worked long and hard to get to West Point, and with difficulty had managed to make it through my four years there. I had spent a year in navigation school and six months in bombardier school, had attended Air Force survival training, and had received more weeks of B-52 ground and air training. It had been six years altogether. How could I let it all slip away for refusing this one little lie that apparently nobody cared about anyway? Yet this lie was contrary to everything I had been taught and believed in about being an officer.

When my crew met to plan the mission, I asked to speak to my aircraft commander privately. As soon as we were alone, I told him, "If you want to cheat on these missiles, that's up to you. But get yourself a new navigator, because I'm not going to do it." He was furious and berated me for quite a long time. Then he left the room, slamming the door. I was plenty scared, and I thought it was the end of my career.

An hour or so later he was still angry when he said he wanted to see me alone. Once we were alone, he said, "Okay. We'll do it your way. And this won't affect your performance report. But those

missiles better be reliable.” I told him that I would do everything possible to make them so, but I wouldn’t cheat. Later I heard that this aircraft commander had told someone, “I don’t know whether Bill’s a good navigator or not, but I trust him. He’s honest, and he’s got guts.”

The missiles were reliable. To this day I don’t know if I was skilled or lucky, or whether the two lieutenant colonels had figured out a way to fool their inexperienced young navigator. But here’s something I did know. I knew how far I would go for what I believed to be right. And the answer: all the way. I believe this knowledge has helped me immensely over the years, and I believe that I owe whatever success I have achieved in part to this decision to do the “harder right.” In fact that decision still affects my thinking today. Had it ended my career then and there, it still would have been worth this priceless piece of knowledge about myself.

You are in the same position. If you haven’t met this test yet, you will. If you already have and passed it, congratulations; you’re on the right path. If you failed, don’t make the same mistake twice. You don’t have to. The past does not equal the future. And it’s never too late.

Guard Your Principles

As I’ve said, integrity doesn’t only mean being honest and talking straight. It means being trustworthy and principled.

I met George Brown before he retired from his civilian career. He stood tall and straight, and was respected by all who knew him. After his military service he had gone back to school under the G.I. Bill. Eventually, he got his doctorate and became a university professor. As I was getting into the “professor business,” George was getting ready to retire. In the university, his leadership skills and integrity were practiced in one of the most trying environments outside of combat: the college classroom. And George excelled.

By the time he became professor emeritus, he had won numerous awards for teaching. He was equally popular with students, faculty, and administrators.

When I was just starting out as a professor, George took his fellow (former) “warrior” under his wing. He told me the above story as well as the one that I am about to tell you.

During George’s first year at the university, it was rumored that some professors were cutting their night school classes and letting students leave early. Evening classes started at 6:00 P.M. and continued until 10:00 P.M. with a twenty-minute break at the midway point. These professors were dismissing their classes as much as an hour early. Apparently, the chancellor’s office had got wind of what was going on from student complaints. The chancellor told the deans that he would send someone around to monitor the classes unannounced. Professors not teaching their full class periods would be disciplined. Those professors, like George, who were not yet tenured would be dismissed for the same cause.

George’s dean sent warnings to all professors teaching night classes to teach their full class periods. George had been following the rules and wasn’t worried. However, only days after the chancellor’s announcement and the dean’s warning, George ran into a problem.

In one of his night classes he had invited guest speakers to lecture at two sessions. Each speaker would lecture for an hour, followed by a half hour answering questions. There would be a short break, and George would then lecture for the final two hours and ten minutes. The first session had worked out fine. But George was young and still inexperienced. He was not prepared for an unexpected turn of events.

Unfortunately, that was exactly what happened: George’s guest speaker did not show up. Several years later this would have been no problem. By that time George would have enough material and be experienced enough to simply cover a few hours of the following week’s lesson. However, as a new professor George was only

slightly ahead of the students. He had two hours and ten minutes of lecture to present that night, perhaps a few minutes more. But that was it.

The Man in White

Normally, George would have dismissed the class early, felt a little stupid, learned his own lesson from what had happened, and moved on. However, George remembered the dean's warning about monitors from the chancellor's office. And sure enough, on this one night when his speaker didn't show, a stranger showed up dressed in an all-white suit with a black tie. George knew this man had to be the monitor from the chancellor's office.

As George began his two-hour lecture, he reviewed his options. He could drag his lecture out and think up some time-wasting activities. With a little luck and by dragging the break out a little longer, he could probably stretch things to 10:00 P.M. The alternative didn't look so good. Even if he took a twenty-minute break in the middle of his two-hour-and-ten-minute lecture, he would still be releasing his students more than an hour early.

George had had a hard time finding his job. There hadn't been many professorial openings the year he completed his graduate degree. And now George feared that he stood an excellent chance of losing his job. Not a terrific prospect, especially since he and his wife had a two-year-old baby girl to feed. They surely weren't going to be able to manage on his wife's salary as a secretary.

As George continued to lecture, he wrestled with himself. He knew that the right thing to do did not include wasting forty students' time because of his own inexperience and lack of preparation. At the halfway point he announced a twenty-minute break. "I really hadn't admitted to myself that I was going to let them go early, what with 'the man in white' there and everything," he told me. "But I guess in my heart of hearts, I knew. Any leader, in the classroom or out, must do the right thing or he will lose his self-respect."

At the end of his lecture George told the class what had happened and took full responsibility. He announced that they would be excused more than an hour early, and he recommended that they use the time to study. The students applauded. George's heart sank: *The man in white just wrote something down in a book*, he noticed to himself.

That night he told his wife. "Well, I screwed up, and I may get fired." She told him not to worry. She said it would all work out.

The next day one of his female students came to his office. "I hope you didn't mind," she said. "I enjoy your lectures so much that I invited my fiancé to attend last night. I didn't have an opportunity to introduce him to you, but he was the one in the white suit and black tie. He's a host at a restaurant and came right from work."

"I never felt so relieved and so foolish all at the same time," George related. "I was relieved that I wouldn't be losing my job, but I think I was even more relieved when I realized how close I had come to wasting more than forty student-hours simply because one of my students brought her fiancé to class!"

In contrast, many corporate executives don't blink an eye at permanently discharging thousands of loyal employees. They will state that integrity is important, and if asked they would probably say that the firings "go against their principles" but that they had "no choice." They offer little or nothing to most of their employees to ease the pain of dismissal. Yet many of these employees have worked for the organization their entire careers. Moreover, in many of these corporations CEOs take big bonuses and salary increases even as they fire employees.

Even when layoffs are necessary for the survival of a company—as in times of great economic challenge—two cautionary notes can be held up for company executives who want to maintain absolute integrity. First, leadership should share the pain through its own salary cuts. Second, everything possible should be done to ease the pain of those who must be terminated.

Summary

Maintaining absolute integrity is the bottom-line rule for leaders who expect subordinates to follow under any and all conditions—to hell and back, that is. You can develop your integrity if you will

- Keep your word.
- Choose the harder right over the easier wrong.
- Guard your principles.