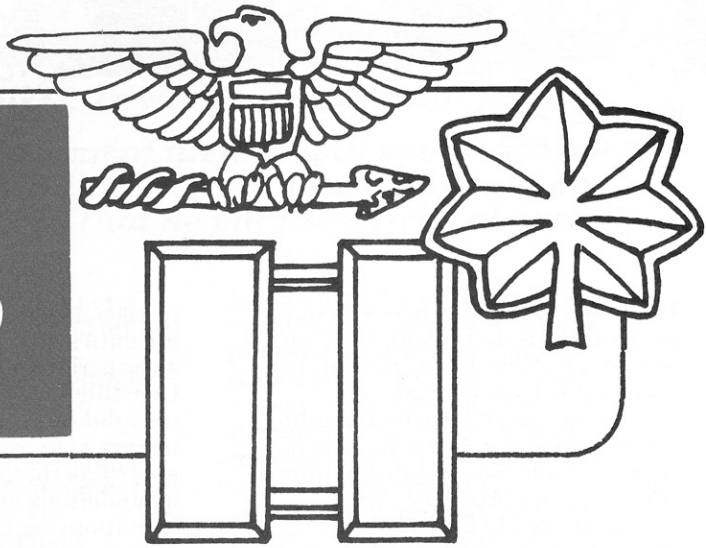
Charles E. Kilbourne: a study in leadership



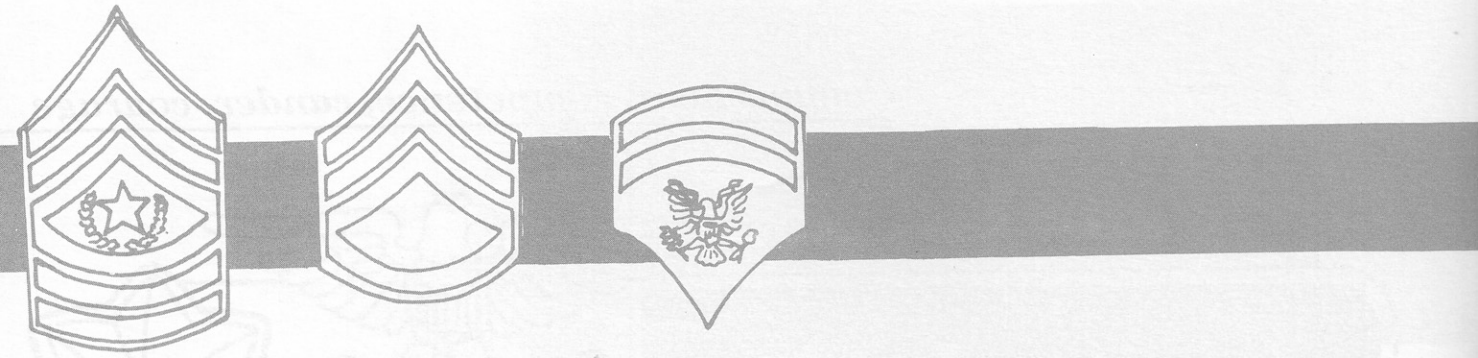
by Capt. Paul D. Hughes

In this Year of Leadership, many initiatives have been undertaken to strengthen the quality of the leadership we provide our soldiers, the Army, and the nation. In spite of all our classes, our publications, and our speeches, the development of leadership is basically an individually initiated action based on the soldier's professional qualities of commitment, competence, candor, and courage. These qualities are also individually developed, and the direction set for their development is greatly influenced by the soldier's superiors, both present and past. **Unfortunately, the examination of military history had fallen out of vogue until just recently, but efforts** are underway at the Signal Center to revitalize this indispensable source for leadership training. One such historical example is Charles E. Kilbourne, Jr., one of the two Signal Corps officers awarded the Medal of Honor and the namesake of the Signal Officer Basic Course Leadership Award. His embodiment of the professional qualities not only laid the basis for the combat success of units he commanded and of other units that fought succeeding battles where he had worked, but also insured his successful career as an Army officer.

Charles Evans Kilbourne, Jr., was born on 23 December 1872 to Charles and Ada Kilbourne at Fort Whipple (later renamed Fort Myers in honor of the father of the Signal Corps). Being the son of a Signal Corps officer, Kilbourne spent much of his boyhood at various Army posts. At the age of fifteen, he entered the preparatory school of Ohio State University, but later dropped out due to illness. In 1891 he was admitted to the Virginia Military Institute and graduated in 1894 with a degree in Civil Engineering. Following graduation, he moved west and worked as a surveyor in New Mexico and the Pacific Northwest. After spending some time as an Indian school disciplinarian, he became an observer with the US Weather Bureau until the war with Spain broke out in 1898.

Heeding the call to arms, Kilbourne joined the Volunteer Signal Corps, an expansion of the regular Signal Corps assigned to provide tactical communications to the rapidly expanding Regular Army which was undertaking its first global combat effort. The requirements for being accepted as an officer in the Volunteer Signal Corps (VSC) stipulated that the applicant be skilled in an electrical vocation or telegraphy. Out of the 107 officers commissioned in the VSC, Kilbourne was one of the few appointed for his leadership potential and not for his technical expertise. Being assigned to the First Company, VSC, 2nd Lt. Kilbourne shipped out with Maj. Gen. Arthur MacArthur's expedition to the Philippine Islands where he participated in the campaign against Spanish forces culminating in the capture of Manila. Following the end of hostilities with Spain, the Philippine Insurrection broke out on 4 February 1899. The following day 1st Lt. Kilbourne earned a place in history when "within a range of 250 yards of the enemy and in the face of rapid fire (he) climbed a telegraph pole at the east end of (Paco Bridge) and in full view of the enemy coolly and carefully repaired a broken telegraph wire, thereby reestablishing telegraphic communication to the front." For his gallantry and courage Kilbourne was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor, the only Signal Corps officer to win it in the performance of a combat communications mission, and only the second Signal Corps officer ever to be awarded this honor. Before leaving the Philippine Islands, Kilbourne applied for a commission in the Regular Army but was denied due to a physical disqualification, presumably **linked to his earlier childhood illness. Upon his return to San Francisco, he reapplied and was accepted as an infantry officer in the 14th Infantry Regiment.**

Sent back to the Far East in late 1899, Kilbourne saw action during the Boxer Rebellion at Peking where he led his platoon in the assault that captured the Imperial City Gates. With the rebellion suppressed, his regiment returned to duty in the



Phillippine Islands where Kilbourne performed his duties with the Provost Marshal's office. It was during this tour that Kilbourne made an important career decision regarding his service to the Army. In 1902 he requested and was granted a branch transfer to the Artillery Corps.

Transferred to Fort Monroe, Virginia, to attend the Artillery School, he took full advantage of his situation to learn all that he could about his new branch. So intense were his efforts, he graduated as the honor graduate in his class and was assigned as the post and district adjutant, a highly competitive and prestigious position in his day. For the next two years he served in this capacity until he was promoted to captain in 1905 and given successive commands of coast artillery companies.

Kilbourne's tenures in command were always characterized by two demands: strenuous, tough training and excellent maintenance. Inspection reports spoke of the "perfect conditions" of his coast artillery batteries and of his unit's training which resulted in new gunnery records being set and the techniques for both range-finding and fire direction being improved.

While commanding the 35th Company, Coast Artillery Corps, Kilbourne returned to the Philippine Islands when the company was assigned the defense of Manila Bay. This tour was highlighted with his beginning the construction of an elaborate defensive fortification system on Corregidor Island. This was to have far-reaching effects on the course of world events and was credited by the British as having saved Australia by delaying the Japanese advances at the beginning of WWII. (His efforts were finally completed in 1932 when as a brigadier general he commanded the entire harbor defenses of Manila.) However, in 1909 he left Corregidor to assume his duties as the Inspector, and later as Superintendent, of the Philippine Constabulary Bureau and School. Not only did he perform well in the training environment, but when Moro guerrillas threatened the local area, he undertook several tactical operations against them. In 1911 he was posted to the War Department General Staff during which time he developed plans for another harbor defensive system: Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. Serving in several staff positions for the following six years, he established relationships with his superiors, peers, and subordinates based upon mutual respect and trust. While serving as the Chief of Staff, Southeastern Department, in Charleston, SC, Maj. Kilbourne saw the need for a regular army post in that part of the country. His vision led to the establishment of Fort Jackson, South Carolina, which became, and has remained, a mainstay in the training base of the US Army.

When the United States declared war on Germany in April, 1917, Lt. Col. Kilbourne was selected by Maj. Gen. Leonard Wood to be his Chief of Staff of the 89th Infantry Division. In preparing to move the division to France, Lt. Col. Kilbourne made a pre-deployment trip to the front in France to gather as much information as he could concerning this new war. While learning of the new demands of trench warfare, he was seriously wounded in action by a mortar shell and was returned to Camp Funston, Kansas, where the 89th Infantry Division was training for the European theater. Not letting the seriousness of his wounds deter him, and now a colonel, he led the advance party of the division to France and prepared the way to get the 89th Infantry Division into combat as soon as possible. Once the division was in combat, the Chief of Staff set the example for leaders at all levels by "moving among the forward units, reorganizing them, and urging them forward." For his efforts during the St. Mihiel offensive, he was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross. In October, 1918, he was promoted to brigadier general and was the commanding general of both the 36th Artillery Brigade and later the 3rd Infantry Brigade of the 2nd Division. Maj. Gen. John A. Lejune, the legendary Marine general and commanding general of the 2nd Division, wrote of his subordinate that he executed his duties in an "excellent, able, conscientious and painstaking" manner. This assignment was a testament to Kilbourne's flexible approach to his duties and his incredible ability to learn a great deal about his job in a short period of time. His performance of duty in these last two assignments was recognized by the awarding of the Distinguished Service Medal and the distinction of being the only soldier at that time to hold the nation's three highest awards.

Upon his return to the United States and the reduction of the military's size, Kilbourne reverted to his permanent rank of major in the Regular Army. Assigned as an instructor and student to the Army War College in Washington, DC, he graduated with honors and later became a course director at the college. By 1928 he had been promoted to brigadier general in the Regular Army and served another tour in the Philippines. He returned to Fort Sam Houston in 1936 as a major general where he commanded the 2nd Division until his retirement on 31 December 1936. He subsequently served as the Superintendent of the Virginia Military Institute for nine years until he retired from that post for health reasons. Kilbourne died in 1963.

General Maxwell D. Taylor on leadership:

A reflective reading of history will show that no man ever rose to military greatness who could not convince his troops that he put them first, above all else.

In looking at the life of this soldier, what makes him noteworthy for his leadership? The soldierly qualities that he possessed and refined formed the foundation of the dynamic leadership which he provided his subordinates in both combat and peace. Always keeping in mind his obligation as a professional, Kilbourne availed himself of every opportunity to improve his soldiering skills. His professionalism was built upon the cornerstones of what we today call the four professional soldierly qualities: commitment, competence, candor, and courage.

An examination of his years as a company grade officer can teach many of our present company grade officers the value of these qualities. During these years junior officers develop their qualities and abilities that will enable them as senior officers to provide leadership to their units. Recognizing this was important to Kilbourne, and he actively sought ways to improve his leadership qualities. The first and foremost quality, commitment, was one he nurtured continuously. Faced with separation from the Army after the Philippine Insurrection, he doggedly sought a regular Army commission when it would have been just as easy to return to civilian life. Once on active duty, he committed himself to the units and soldiers he led and served. In doing so, Kilbourne committed himself and his soldiers to providing the best service he knew of to the nation, focusing on attention to detail in both his demanding training programs and his continual maintenance efforts. In many of his efficiency reports, special remarks were made that attest to his fine training and his superior maintenance, both areas of immediate concern to any present day company grade officer. Commitment is not a quality that gets turned on and off at appropriate times; rather, it is constant and permeates everything an officer does, in spite of any adversity.

Throughout his career, Kilbourne took every opportunity to improve his knowledge of soldiering. The competence he developed paid tremendous dividends in his success as a leader. As a relatively new Signal Corps lieutenant, his desire to learn earned him a high ranking among all Signal Corps lieutenants. His technical ability played a direct role in his action at the Paco Bridge when he won the Medal of Honor. Understanding that maintenance is essential to a successful unit, Kilbourne learned all he could about his equipment and made his soldiers take care of it. Recognizing that he was not as knowledgeable about his new branch as his classmates in the Artillery School, Kilbourne took full advantage of the instruction and graduated as the honor graduate. His development of the requisite skills of leadership helped prepare Kilbourne for command and as a company commander he utilized this competency to insure that his men were the best trained soldiers in the Coast Artillery Corps. Many good officers attain high levels of academic and technical competence, but what set Kilbourne apart from the rest of his peers was his creative competency with which he could develop and build on concepts such as the defensive systems of Corregidor and Guantanamo, the establishment of new ports, and new educational development programs.

It is evident by reading the comments made by superior officers that Kilbourne earned the trust and respect of many "giants" of those days, such as Maj. Gen. MacArthur, Maj. Gen. Wood, and Maj. Gen. Lejune. This trust was a direct result of Kilbourne's candor, the third professional soldierly quality. Kilbourne practiced this candor with his superiors, subordinates, and peers thereby establishing the credibility of his commands. The soldiers who accompanied him on the Paco Bridge or through no-man's land at St. Mihiel certainly would not have done so if they felt that Kilbourne was less than honest with them. He knew there was no room for deception or half-truths when it came to leading soldiers. The resulting bonds built between him and his soldiers are testaments to the efficacy of his candor.

The final quality needs little elaboration. Kilbourne's courage was a critical factor in every assignment he had and resulted not only in the successes of unit operations but also in his numerous individual awards. His perseverence through physical and mental danger was directly responsible for battlefield successes and remains a basic ingredient for what it means to be a soldier.

Charles Kilbourne's life as a soldier exemplifies the four cornerstones of professional leadership and contributed significantly to his success as a leader. However ingrained these qualities may be in a leader, they must be credibly and continually demonstrated so that soldiers will follow. These qualities are inextricably linked to the three leadership attributes of BE, KNOW, and DO. Coupled together they provide the Army with the dynamic framework for effective combat leadership necessary to win the AirLand Battle. Without them, the elements for defeat on the battlefield exist. The challenge that Kilbourne has left us is to recognize and analyze our own professional qualities, improve on them, and provide the American soldier the leadership he deserves.