COL (R) Mark T. Lisi

Book Review of: “A Soldier’s Journey Living His Why” by LTG (Retired) Lawson W. Magruder III

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I was thrilled when Lieutenant General (retired) Lawson Magruder asked me to craft a review for this book and post it to the Amazon sales site in 2020. After reading the book, I put pen to paper.  The result was a personal and deeply frank review rooted in the Ranger brotherhood and simple exposure to Lawson Magruder:

Few times in your life do you meet the man you strive to be, and Lawson Magruder is one of those men. This book is a peek into his life and times. Moving, poignant, and frank, the author lays bare how he was raised and how his life’s’ work shaped his world. He excelled in a highly competitive profession without losing his moral compass. Take this journey with Lawson – read this book.

When the Ranger Leadership and Policy Center asked me to provide a book review, this book immediately came to mind. This book review demands a deeper look in to this book and what it might mean to the profession of arms, organizations, and leadership in general.  The implied task is to craft the review in such a way that it compels the reader to seek out the book, read it, and put the lessons learned into practice.  The list of reviewers who have already weighed in publicly on this book is significant; what makes this review different is that it serves as a ground level review of the book by one of his Rangers.

Lawson Magruder has captured his life and career as a very successful military officer in 47 chapters of written work.  He weaves this episodic journey together with courage, faith, and a personal standard that few achieve.  Each reader will find a chapter or event that speaks to them, and moves them to reflect on a similar professional circumstance.  For me, it was Chapter 4, where Lawson walks the D-Day invasion route his father took on “The Day of Days”.  Nothing in a soldier’s life can trump this experience.  Not unlike the “rattle of musketry” in MacArthur’s Farewell Address to the Corps, these words have meaning to those in the brotherhood.  I walked the battlefield at Chipyong-Ni in the Republic of Korea with the 8th Army Historian where my father had participated in this battle as part of the 1st Ranger Company, attached to the 23rd Infantry Regiment; this gave me some perspective on how special this event was for young Lawson Magruder and his father.

I know from personal exposure to LTG (R) Magruder what kind of man, soldier, and leader he is.  As a Private in the initial fill of Company B, 2d Bn (Ranger) 75th Infantry.  I saw him every day and was always amazed that he knew my Christian name.  I do not, in 45 years, remember him ever addressing me by my rank or family name (a leadership trait he learned from his first Platoon Sergeant).   I am and will always be one of Captain Magruder’s Rangers.

Lawson Magruder’s leadership is not transient.  Once touched by it, it is yours forever.  He took the time, 10 years later, to review a fairly damning Officer Efficiency Report I received as a Company Commander.  My position was “don’t let them see you sweat” and “never ask for quarter”, but I did require some sound counsel.  After reviewing the report, I was told very simply “Mark, you have got to command another company.”   There it was, the gloves off assessment.  Lawson Magruder casts a long shadow.  Once you are touched by it, you are a member of the clan.

Laid out in sequential chapters, each chapter builds on the personal growth of the protagonist.  This is not unlike the plan Cervantes laid out for his quintessential protagonist, Don Quixote de la Mancha. Cervantes, known to be the father of the modern novel, brings life to the knight-errant who campaigns across the countryside righting wrongs.  There are certainly similarities between the journeys of both Don Quixote and LTG (R) Magruder.

Both books use both chapters and vignettes, each moving the protagonist along the path of life while meeting obstacles and dealing with them through a unique chivalrous code.  LTG (R) Magruder did not tilt at windmills, nor did he shy away from the hard issues that a Senior Officer encounters. Lawson Magruder is a soldier’s soldier, who has left his thumb print on generations of soldiers as well as the institution.

The link that best connects LTG (R) Magruder’s work with Don Quixote directly is found in the song “The Impossible Dream” in the Musical “The Man of La Mancha”:

To dream ... the impossible dream...

To fight ... the unbeatable foe...

To bear ... with unbearable sorrow...

To run ... where the brave dare not go …

LTG (R) Magruder uses a casual first person voice throughout the entire book.  Strong and fluent, it the perfect vehicle for sharing his story and his experiences. This book is flush with lessons and antidotes; the author uses them to model character and leadership. A young leader would do well to have this book on his or her professional reading list.