



This post originally appeared over at [The Military Leader](#). It is the 4th in a great series on luck in the military. I encourage you to read all the posts sequentially then reflect on the role luck has played in your life.

1.) [The Role of Luck in Becoming a Successful Officer by Drew Steadman](#)

2.) [Proactive Luck by Nathan Finney](#)

3.) [Luck Be a Lady by DoctrineMan!!!](#)

In 1996, ninety-eight men and women successfully reached the summit of Mount Everest. Unfortunately, fifteen climbers lost their lives. On May 10 of that year, a series of mishaps mixed with a powerful storm to create one of the deadliest days in the mountain's history. The story of the two teams, led by Rob Hall and Scott Fischer, has become famous due to the blockbuster movie *Everest* and several books written by the survivors.

Why did some climbers make it to the top and back to basecamp that day, while others lost their lives? John Krakauer, one of the survivors and author of [Into Thin Air](#) wrote the following:

“Truth be told, climbing Everest has always been an extraordinary dangerous undertaking and doubtless always will be...the strongest guides in the world are sometimes powerless to save even their own lives. Four of my teammates died not so much because Rob Hall’s systems were faulty-indeed, nobody’s were better-but because on Everest it is the nature of systems to break down with a vengeance.”

Krakauer’s remarks highlight the point that when it comes to Everest type endeavors, it is not only training and preparation that matter - it is also luck. Therefore, we must take the time to reflect on the sources of our successes and failures to better understand our own strengths and weaknesses. By doing so we avoid two pitfalls that can affect later performance: committing fundamental attribution error and developing an overconfidence bias. Both of these pitfalls can leave us blinded and we won’t focus on areas where we need to improve, or we miss out on chance opportunities, or worse, we hitch our personal value to our professional progression (or lack thereof).

A twenty-year military career can be a lot like climbing Everest. However, the summit is different for everyone. For some, the summit may be battalion or brigade command or command sergeant major position. For others, it might be reaching retirement. Regardless, all leaders graduate basic training or their commissioning source and set out from basecamp to conquer the mountain. Along the way, back-to-back deployments, weak subordinates, bad bosses, bad evaluation reports, family issues, and a series of other storms, avalanches, and ice collapses can keep us from reaching the top.

Many of these pitfalls are beyond our control, and are inherent to a military career. On the other hand, getting paired with great team members, hard-working and competent subordinates, excellent timing of assignments, the luck of former bosses, and the perfect mixture of leader personalities can be instrumental in the positive direction of our careers. Much like Everest, no matter how capable you are or well-planned your climb/career may be, luck plays a role.

When we fail to reflect on the sources of our success and failures, we run the risk of committing fundamental attribution error. When things are going well, we tend to attribute success to our own competence, leadership style, or system. We discount the role other factors play in the outcome, to include chance. This blinds us from our weaknesses, and we then fail to address the areas where we need improvement, which could prove fatal as we move further up the mountain that is our career.

Think of the toxic company commander who receives a superior rating because his company always outperforms other companies. That company commander may think they walk on water, but in fact they lucked out, the organization was carried by a cast of strong platoon sergeants, an excellent first sergeant, and motivated soldiers who would have performed well, regardless of who was holding the guidon. Eventually, as he climbs the ladder of success, his leadership approach backfires, and both he and the organization fails. On numerous occasions, I personally blamed incidents in my organization on “bad luck”, but never once uttered the words “good luck” when we achieved a successful outcome.

Second, when we neglect the presence of luck in our careers, we begin to develop overconfidence bias. Success over time builds confidence, which is a good thing. However, continued success can quickly turn into arrogance. This is usually the crossroads where toxic leaders made a wrong turn in their careers. Overconfidence bias derailed some of our greatest military leaders to include McClellan, MacArthur, and even recent ones who thought they had risen above the system. Morgan McCall Jr., the author of [High Flyers: Developing the Next Generation of Leaders](#), posits that “the net effect of arrogance as it grows over time is that once effective people become increasingly out of touch and less effective.”

Like climbing Everest, the main ingredients for success in a military career are preparation, training, and a [good team](#). [Luck plays a non-negligible role](#) and must be recognized, both to leverage those lucky opportunities when available, but also to ensure we don’t get too focused on ourselves or think all success stems from our performance alone.

Finally, not everyone is going to make it to the professional summit and back, and when we don’t make it, we can’t stake our personal value on the success of our careers. Sometimes, no matter how good you are, [lady luck](#) just doesn’t have your number.

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