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A year ago, in March of 2020, the New York City Recruiting Battalion (NYCRB) faced an unexpected challenge. New York Governor Cuomo declared a state of emergency as the COVID-19 virus spun out of control in New Rochelle. As the world was just beginning to understand the lethality of the virus, like most organizations, the U.S. military was still coming to grips with how it could contain the virus within the force. Through adaptability, resilience, and strong leadership, the NYCRB overcame the challenges presented by the

global pandemic to ensure that America's men and women volunteering to serve the nation could continue to fill the ranks.

Adaptability: A global pandemic renders traditional recruiting methods obsolete and the junior leaders of the NYCRB rapidly adapted to these realities. Events where recruiters have historically held face-to-face interactions with recruits (job fairs, high school sports events, mass-transit hubs, etc.) stopped with the advent of social distancing norms. Junior leaders, specifically the non-commissioned officers (NCOs) of the NYCRB embraced mission command and leveraged technology from smartphones to social media platforms to continue the vital mission of recruiting command.

As the world settled into teleworking, NCOs of the NYCRB leveraged Microsoft Teams and FaceTime to collaborate and conduct essential planning meetings, training, and accountability requirements. United States Recruiting Command (USAREC) authorized the use of virtual operations to conduct applicant interviews, witness signatures, and commence the application process, which could be completed once appointments at Military Entrance Processing Stations (MEPS) resumed. Traditional job fairs evolved into virtual fairs; organic social media video content emerged to supplement formal Army marketing products; digital marketing moved to streaming services, jobsite platforms, and Google and Facebook Ads; and face-to-face classroom presentations transitioned to virtual Zoom presentations.

COVID-19 will not be the last contingency recruiting command will face and overcome. For example, extreme weather across the country tested the lessons learned and adaptability of our recruiting force. As airports and training bases were shut down, USAREC and Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) diverted hundreds of Future Soldiers (FS) to other training bases for initial training while local commanders executed well-worn telework battle drills. Throughout the chain of command, adaptability to the set process must continue for USAREC to remain an adaptable learning organization.

Resilience: Army recruiters are not immune to the effects of COVID-19. To ensure continued success and mission accomplishment, leaders in 1st Recruiting Brigade developed a Red Working Group to discuss COVID-19 concerns and develop a long-term strategy for operating in congested or “Red” environments. Early on, we anticipated the magnitude and length of time it may take to return to normal operations. Returning to a new normal required the development of a long-term strategy for the unknowable future. Invited to this working group were adjacent battalions in the northeast, recruiting units facing similar challenges in hard-hit metro areas, and senior leaders from USAREC. The working group’s products and recommendations included battle drills, risk management techniques, quarantine requirements and support to hundreds of NCOs and their families who contracted the virus. The Red Working Group developed leader-decision flow charts for presumed or confirmed positive Soldiers or applicants, trace analysis procedures, and even developed a common operating picture (COP) to depict station and MEPS closures.

Mission command relies on trust between leaders in both the operational and institutional force. Continued dialogue up and down the recruiting chain of command is essential for maintaining continuity of operations. Notably, the NYCRB pioneered a risk mitigation strategy that incorporated known protection procedures (masks, disinfectant, social distancing) with an extensive COVID-19 testing strategy designed to minimize quarantine requirements for mission essential personnel. NYCRB conducted trace analysis for confirmed positives, enacted “A” and “B” team alternative work schedules, and empowered Company and Station Level Commanders to manage hours of operations that were both conducive to individual home-life situations and the changes in market conditions.

Maintaining resilience in institutional commands such as USAREC is just as important as resilience of the operational force. Should commands such as recruiting command or cadet command lose their ability to achieve their respective missions, it would jeopardize the ability of the operational force to fight and win America’s wars.

Leadership: Non commissioned officers who served a tour in USAREC during the COVID-19 global pandemic will return the operational force as experienced leaders. These NCOs embraced change and adapted successfully to a complex and continually evolving environment both in terms of home and work life. However, their active participation in the decision-making process and the opportunity for emotional intelligence growth are unique leadership qualities USAREC NCOs obtained in this crisis. In New York City, NCOs overcame personal adversity while providing support to teammates, Future Soldiers (FS), and applicants. Hospitalizations, evictions, homelessness, unemployment, and death of family members due to the high positivity and fatality rates of NYC, for example, were encountered often and had to be overcome. These leaders provided mentorship, empathy, and assistance to FS, applicants, their community, and to each other in terms of volunteering, child-care, morale support, and more. Additionally, NCOs at all levels provided direct feedback to their chain of command which drove Battalion and Brigade level command decisions for risk mitigation, work hours, station closures, processing operations and more. NYCRB NCOs continue to play a key role in decision-making as the pandemic evolves and the “new normal” continues to emerge.

An all-volunteer force is an all-recruited force. Leaders across the Army must recognize the growth opportunity an assignment to USAREC will bring to the operational Army. The Army will benefit from leaders who withstood and overcame the challenges of filling the force’s ranks throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. They will be critical to providing unique solutions to the toughest and most complicated problems of the force. These benefits transcend rank and position.

Conclusion

There are many elements that contribute to readiness of the joint force. From an Army perspective, the ability to man, equip, and train the force per its *Title-10* responsibilities is just one of these elements. Manning the force through the recruitment of the next

generation is a responsibility placed on the shoulders of the non-commissioned officer corps. As the Army emerges from the COVID-19 pandemic, it would be wise to embrace leadership lessons learned and the essential role of Recruiting NCOs to innovate, persevere, and maintain the readiness of the operational force.

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