

A TIME TO HOLD AND A TIME TO FOLD

by DAVID H. HACKWORTH, 02 January 2001

U.S. Army Rangers are elite warriors. During World War II, they more than proved their daring, skill and ability to do the impossible in deadly places such as San Pietro and Normandy. Once the shooting stopped, the Army disappeared its Ranger battalions. But Rangers came back for the Korean and Vietnam wars, where they operated as separate companies executing high-risk, behind-the-lines missions with the same dash and courage as their predecessors. After Vietnam, the Pentagon re-formed this extraordinary force -- 1st, 2nd and 3rd battalions, 75th Rangers Regiment -- and they've been out there in tombstone country doing hard duty ever since. Like the Rangers of WW II, Korea and Vietnam fame, they're at the forward edge: parachuting into Grenada and Panama at night to a warm welcome from enemy tracers and -- overtly or covertly -- at every other hot spot coming down. You know, killing fields like Somalia, where a surrounded Ranger company fought off a force 20 times its size. In recognition of the especially high risks they take both in training and in combat and how hard they work to keep in razor-sharp shape, the Army awarded these heroes the distinctive black beret. Like the word SWAT on the back of an FBI or police uniform, the beret says: We're special. Few in today's slack Army can make the physical and mental cut. Few can handle the discipline, the sacrifice, the 100-pound load and fast Ranger pace. Few are willing to pay the price to join these American Spartans who live by the sword and -- if asked -- die by the sword. Just like our elite Special Forces troopers with their green berets, and paratroopers with theirs in maroon, our Rangers take great pride in their black berets, which to them are far more than headgear. The black beret is a badge of honor that says: We are as good as you can get. We're the last surviving warriors in an Army gone soft because of the bureaucrats at the top, the go-along-to-get-along types in the middle and the overabundance of what's-in-it-for-me slugs down at the bottom....A beret for all ranks won't fix the problems driving the exodus -- self-serving senior officer leadership that's turned micromanagement and Consideration of Others into an art form. Nor will a beret do much for the low pay, ghetto-like housing and back-to-back deployments in running sores like Bosnia and Kosovo. Nor will it return the ideals of Duty, Honor, Country that are now just words because slick ticket-punching managers have replaced stand-up-and-be-counted leaders. Only leadership can fix the Army's problems. I hear Shinseki is a good man. A smart general knows when to defend and when to retreat. He should cut his losses on the beret. This might upset a few Ranger-hating staff pukers and a factory in Arkansas that's gearing up to make a million black berets. It might even annoy Bill Clinton, who might be into the irony of an Army that his policies have demolished wearing Monica-esque black berets. Spiking the berets-for-everyone order would send a message that Shinseki reads the signposts loud and clear and is smart enough to change course when he's headed in the wrong direction.

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