

# LT Dave Spangenberg

If you were looking for an example of one of our young leaders living up to the Army Values under the difficult circumstances of today's battlefield than you could look at the example set by LT Dave Spangenberg. While serving in the area around Baghdad, LT Spangenberg's adherence to the Army Values did not falter and as such his unit continued on to complete their mission:

On April 15th, Dave's platoon was returning from a 13-hour, dismounted, vehicle-interdiction mission. It was the first hot day of the spring, and his men were nearly out of water. The farmland terrain in his company's area of operations was divided by deep canals with few crossing points, and the Soldiers treat every canal crossing point as a linear danger area. Dave's platoon came to their planned crossing point, established security, and deliberately inspected for signs of IEDs. His Soldiers identified a wire, so they reported the situation and moved to a different bridge. There, again they set out security, inspected and cleared the near side of the bridge, inspected and cleared the far side, and then began to move across. The first squad crossed; Dave and his RTO crossed; then "BOOM!" A command-detonated, deep-buried IED exploded, cutting down the platoon's best machine gunner. Dave immediately called a 9-line and his medic sped into action, but there was nothing they could do. Corporal Bishop died inside his platoon's perimeter, secured by his fellow Soldiers.

As the medevac bird took off, Dave prepared to move his distraught platoon the final 800 meters to their company patrol base. Then he received a FRAGO over the radio: "Clear OBJ Kings." Objective Kings was a 30-building hamlet that his platoon had cleared two days before. To clear an objective is to conduct a cordon-and-knock, talking with the people and observing for any enemy activity. To clear the objective properly would take 8-10 hours. His men had just completed a 13-hour mission, on an energy-sapping hot day, and had just watched one of their own die before their eyes.

"Look at the men, sir," his platoon sergeant told him. "They can't do this." The Soldiers of 2nd Platoon were exhausted and low on water, but they were also angry, itching to exact payback for their friend's gruesome death.

Yet, the mission was clear. Dave moved his platoon to the outskirts of OBJ Kings and had them clear and occupy a building. After putting security on the roof, he gave them a 30-minute tactical pause. The PL gave his men time to process what had just happened, to, in his words, "get in the right mindset for a cordon-and-search. The squad leaders made sure that their Soldiers understood what had just happened. Mostly, there was dead silence in the house.

During this pause, Dave stepped outside and called back to his commander, asking for further guidance in an attempt to limit the duration or provide more meaning to the mission. "Are there particular targets we can focus on? Do we have any evidence to go on?" he asked. The specific intent of his command, however, was to keep the Soldiers' minds off what had just occurred, so

no further guidance was offered. The mission was curtly reiterated: “Clear all of OBJ Kings.” Dave requested a water resupply to meet them on the OBJ, and prepared to continue the mission.

Dave recalls thinking that he wished he could give a Henry V “into the breach once more, boys” speech, but he couldn’t; he was as heartbroken as his Soldiers. He stood before his men. “I know this sucks,” he leveled with them. “I know we’re all hurting. But we’re Soldiers, and Soldiers always accomplish the missions given to them. Our task is to clear Objective Kings. Our purpose is to collect intelligence on the triggerman. We’re going to do this right, like we always do. We’re going to knock, be polite, look for certain names, and stay alert. And then we’re going to get back to the patrol base and get some rest.” And that’s exactly what the platoon did. Having successfully and honorably accomplished two missions, they arrived back at their company patrol base 24 hours after they had departed it, with one fewer Soldier in their ranks.

Six days later, on only their second mission “outside the wire” since the death of CPL Bishop, 2nd Platoon was once again returning from an all-day mission. This time, they traveled after sunset to reduce the risk of a command-detonated IED. This time, they stayed off paths to reduce the risk of pressure-plate, victim-activated IEDs. Unfortunately, in the dark of night one Soldier drifted towards a path, and BOOM! was engulfed in a fireball.

Dave immediately called the 9-line, but, as before, there was nothing the medic could do. Corporal Bevel, who had been in the platoon since he arrived as a private, was dead. For the second time in a week, Dave carried the body of one of his Soldiers to the medevac. When he returned, he looked into the eyes of shocked and frightened Soldiers. In two of their last three patrols, one of their own had been killed—without warning, violently, gruesomely. They had done everything right, yet things were going terribly wrong. They were pushed to their emotional limits. And there was still one more choke point to cross on the way back to the patrol base.

In the silence, one Soldier asked his platoon leader, “What do we do now, sir?”

Dave himself was scared, but he knew what he had to do.

“Follow me, guys. If anyone else is going to get killed tonight, it’s going to be me.” They formed a ranger file behind their platoon leader, keeping proper dispersion, and he led them home, walking point the entire way.

The respect and love that those Soldiers have for their platoon leader, LT Dave Spangenberg, is remarkable to witness. It is a bond forged by a combat leader who leads them with courage, compassion, and judgment, especially when it matters most. In the most difficult of situations, when physical and mental fatigue are at their peaks and men are burdened by grief, a leader must reach down and find something to draw from and get his men back on course. LT Spangenberg was able to find the inner strength to keep his men going. Serving as the moral compass of his unit and using the Army Values as his markers LT Spangenberg’s kept his unit together and saw his mission through to completion.

## **Questions to Discuss with your Soldiers...**

What values do you see coming into conflict in the situations in this case? Conflicts between personal values and professional values can often result in moral dilemma. What processes are available to help resolve conflict or dilemma?

As a leader in a situation similar to that of LT Dave Spagenberg, what opinions do you have in responding to orders? As a soldier in a situation similar to the soldiers in this scenario how would you react to orders to go back out on a mission?

What Army Values did Lt Dave Spagenberg uphold? How have you upheld these values in your own service to the Army?

LT Dave Spagenberg displayed moral courage as he led his men home. Moral courage can be found in a variety of non-combat actions, such as confronting a friend about his drinking problem, admitting that you don't have the answer, or even asking someone out on a date. What are some morally courageous acts you have performed in your life?

