

Guerrilla Leadership

3 valuable lessons teams can learn from
leading on the frontline



CORRINNE ARMOUR

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My first night in the jungle

I am sitting cross-legged on the floor of a small bamboo house in a jungle refugee camp on the edge of a war zone on the Thai-Burmese border. My body is paralysed with fear. How did I get here? I'm just a regular 26-year-old Australian woman; I grew up in the country; I have no experience of war; and I can't speak the local language. What do I do now?

In walks a 4-year-old girl. She is small, dirty, and dressed in tatters—not at all how I would expect a leader to show up. She steps forward, smiles and takes my hand—the hand of a white, first-world woman—and guides me out of my fear. She doesn't speak my language. She speaks the language of courage and compassion, and in this moment, she teaches me everything I need to know about leadership.

She leads me away from my fear to what would become my new community.

I settled in as the English teacher and the only 'foreigner' in a refugee camp of 4000 people; I made friends, learned the language, and (almost) got used to having a bunker dug under my house. In the two years that I lived in the jungle, I never felt such fear again, despite threats of kidnapping and cross border shelling—such was the power of the lessons I learnt from my 4-year-old leader.



Who has helped you become the leader you are today?

Meeting the Guerrilla

In my first week, I made an 'unofficial' visit over the border into Burma. There, I met Min Thein, a fascinating leader operating in dire circumstances. Like so many others in the jungle, Min Thein was a 'revolutionary' fighting for democracy for Burma.



Burma (now called Myanmar) has a confronting recent history. In August 1988, there was a popular democratic uprising and the Burmese military killed thousands of students as they protested peacefully in the streets of the major cities. It was horrendous.

Min Thein, and so many others, fled the death and destruction of the major cities. They made the dangerous and difficult journey to the jungle in the border regions. Despite the incredible fear of the Burmese military, they joined in an armed struggle for democracy.

It's one thing to stand up for your rights. It's another to put your life on the line every day for something you believe in.



What do you believe in? What would you be willing to sacrifice to protect or achieve that?

Facing up to the challenges

Life as a guerrilla fighter in a largely unfunded volunteer army is challenging. There are no extrinsic motivations available and little you can use as an incentive. There is no salary, no car parking, (no cars!). Often there are no shoes and no provisions. The standard gear Min Thein had was one uniform, a plastic wrap for warmth and shelter at night, one rice sack, and one water bottle. And a weapon and ammunition.

Every day, there are high levels of complexity and uncertainty. Guerrilla warfare typically involves small attacking units dependent on the support of the local population, so there were many variables for the fighters. Where is the enemy? What strategies will they employ? What will we do? What will be the flow on impacts? In the late 80s/early-mid 90s, leaders communicated via basic walkie talkies. The village runners provided local communication as well as navigational guidance in the deep jungle.

There are no 'business hours' on the frontline. It's easy to become overwhelmed when the work is unrelenting and physically exhausting. It's dangerous and emotionally draining. The stakes are high—as a leader, when you make a poor decision, people can die.

Through all of this, perhaps the biggest challenges are staying positive and keeping morale up when there is no guarantee of a positive outcome—personally, or for the cause.

While your challenges might not be life threatening, perhaps you can relate to the complexity, ambiguity and sheer relentlessness of your work. How do you lead through uncertainty and motivate your team to stick with the cause?



Holding onto Purpose

Min Thein was a true leader. He was in charge of a platoon of 12 men; he motivated them to put themselves in danger every day. How do you do that? How do you ask people to give that much?

Connecting people back to purpose was the main leadership tool that Min Thein had.

Belief is a powerful driver. All his people believed in democracy and overthrowing the military dictatorship; some because of political ideals and some because they had seen their friends killed, their parents murdered or their homes torched. Min Thein listened to the story of individual experiences; he understood their struggle to join the cause. He was able to empathise then relate this back to what they were all fighting for. Min Thein's challenge was to get their beliefs all aligned to the same purpose. This is a challenge for any leader.

A leader's role is to get everyone moving in the same direction, with the same spirit.

What's your purpose? Personally, professionally, for your team? Is it clear and shared?



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Forging Connection

When Naw May Paw (the 4-year-old girl at the beginning of my story) took my hand, she was making a human-to-human connection, despite the lack of shared language. This connection was so powerful that my fear passed.

Connection matters. Leaders have to support their people through every change, every challenge, every setback, and every success. Min Thein could do this because he built strong personal connections—just like Naw May Paw. He worked out what motivated each of his men; he knew about their families, how and when they liked to communicate, and how they were likely to respond under attack. He worked out the dynamics in the team, and who needed support when.

In short, he formed strong bonds with each of his people. People felt good when they were around him.

Connection is more than just feeling good. Recent understanding from neuroscience demonstrates that connection is important to our physical health, not just our emotional health. Feeling connected is intrinsically rewarding to the brain because our brains have evolved to value social attachment. Social isolation—a lack of connection—has the same negative impact on your health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day¹. The brain encodes social pain and physical pain in the same way—social pain hurts.

Conversely, social connection has the power to bring people together to overcome obstacles. When we are in the presence of someone we trust and care about, oxytocin is released. Oxytocin is a neurotransmitter—a chemical released by nerve cells to send signals to other nerve cells—that causes us to be more trusting, to care about others and to be more altruistic. In the heat of battle, oxytocin will help us stay more relaxed and will reduce the threat response in the brain. Strong bonds can help teams survive in crisis situations.



To be a better leader, you need to make better connections. Where could you develop deeper connections with others that will ultimately strengthen your leadership?

¹ I first heard of this research at the 2013 NeuroLeadership Summit in Sydney. Current reference accessed 5/6/19 <https://www.iflscience.com/health-and-medicine/loneliness-is-as-bad-for-your-health-as-smoking-15-cigarettes-a-day/>

Guerrilla Leadership requires Courage

One night I asked Min Thein: 'What is it like to be on the frontline for the first time?'

I was expecting him to say something like, 'Well, you just have to man up and do what's necessary'. His answer was much more honest. He said: 'It's so scary. You forget your purpose; you forget your beliefs and you want to choose the easy way'.

I get that. Our human instinct is to protect ourselves when we are in danger. But to stay and fight takes grit. Courage is not the absence of fear. In fact, the only time you will ever feel a complete lack of fear is when you are dead ... or dead drunk. Neither are useful states for leadership.

Courage is pushing through despite the fear, using the fear as data. Fearing-less. Min Thein says that even when you are afraid, judgement is important. You must compose yourself despite the fear, trust yourself, and then let your decisions provide an anchor for others.

Min Thein: We are making our way through the thick jungle. There are 12 of us and we are spaced out in a long line, three meters apart. Everyone is scared. I am scared too. The enemy is close—I can hear them. I am listening to the whispered voices. Fast decisions need to be made. Withdraw or attack? To the left or right? Shoot, or remain still and hope they miss us?

These critical decisions are made in a microsecond.

Min Thein says that in battle things happen in seconds, and the outcomes of your decisions are known in minutes. Through all their sacrifice, Min Thein and thousands of other brave Burmese people have been part of a movement that, over time, has supported the creation of a more democratic Burma.



Your decisions, and your outward calm while making them, provide a level of comfort for the team. In which domains of leadership do you need more courage?

Post Script

Like many people, my life is divided into chunks of time. In my case, it's 1) Before the jungle, 2) In the jungle, and 3) After the jungle. What I experienced and learned in the jungle, who I became and whom I came to love have left a lasting impression on me and my world.

And what happened to Min Thein? Unfortunately, he was injured on the frontline; he was hit in the leg with shrapnel from a heavy weapon. He was lucky; he survived the incident itself and the grueling three-day trip through rough mountainous jungle on a hammock stretched between two bamboo poles carried by his comrades. (Min Thein describes this casually as 'so painful and so hard'.)

After a slow and painful 12 months' of recovery, he taught in a border primary school because he could no longer fight. This was tough for him, but it worked out for me—we became friends, eventually married, and now he is my life partner and the father of our two beautiful daughters.

Together, we are working out how to apply Guerrilla Leadership to parenting teenagers.



Photo by **Walter Reed** from COAST Magazine

About Corrinne Armour

Corrinne incites people to play their big game through Fearless Leadership®.

A well-recognised instigator of change and growth, she empowers leaders to realise the potential in their careers, teams and organisations. Corrinne draws on over 15 years' experience in the corporate world heading large teams and projects with budgets in excess of \$80 million. She knows firsthand the practicalities of juggling multiple priorities and perspectives.

Some of Corrinne's greatest wisdom (and stories) come from living and working in a jungle refugee camp at the edge of a war zone where she gained powerful insights into leadership and an active passion for Fearless Leadership®. Married to an ex-freedom fighter and mother of two daughters, she appreciates the importance of balance in a team.

Corrinne is a dynamic speaker and influencer. A leader of leaders, she is well-versed in leadership theory with a natural ability to inspire and equip others to uplift and unite the most dysfunctional of teams and challenges them to build engaged, productive teams.

Honest, empathic and results-focused, Corrinne helps you leverage your team's diversity and collective brilliance to establish a leading edge that carves out your organisation from its competitors. Her work is innovative and trusted, informed by positive psychology and underpinned by Neuroscience.



Her clients include GE HealthCare, NAB, Bank Australia, Royal Children's Hospital, Gippsland Water, Worksafe, Dulux Group, Griffith and Monash Universities, and numerous local councils, healthcare networks and community organisations.

Corrinne's latest book 'Leaders Who Ask: Building Fearless Cultures by Telling Less and Asking More' was released in 2018. She is also co-author of 'Developing Direct Reports: Taking the Guesswork Out of Leading Leaders' and two specialist texts in human behaviour used by coaches and consultants worldwide. She is currently working on her next book, 'Guerrilla Leadership: Key Lessons Teams Can Learn From Leading on the Frontline', co-written with her husband who is an ex-freedom fighter.



Fearless Leadership®

Creating the conditions for organisational success by creating one leadership team, aligned and Fearless. Corrinne's Fearless Leadership® Program builds senior leadership and executive teams that are inspired and focused through a strong and shared purpose, connected through mutual understanding and powerful through harnessing their diversity. They are able to trust because of agreed values and lead sustainable organisations through balancing an internal and external focus.



Keynote Speaker

Entertaining. Provocative. Inspiring. Corrinne is known for bringing leadership to life and equipping her audience with actionable insights for their careers, teams and organisations.

Watch Corrinne's showreel <https://corrinnearmour.com/speaker/>

Get in touch

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