



THE GRIT AND GROWTH MINDSET

By Jennifer Alessio and Ron Granieri March 23, 2021

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Ron Granieri: Welcome to A Better Peace, the War Room podcast. I'm **Ron Granieri**, Professor of History at the Department of National Security and Strategy at the U.S. Army War College and Podcast Editor of the War Room. It's a pleasure to have you with us. Are leaders made or born? A classic, even cliched, question that remains difficult to answer. The easiest dodge is to say both, in that a potential leader brings her own unique set of skills and experiences to the course of training and education that will prepare her for leadership, in practice, however, popular discussions of leadership consistently slip into the romantic notion that training merely reveals the innate qualities of a leader, rather than accepting, let alone welcoming the idea that leaders learn and grow in response to challenges. The struggle against adversity doesn't just sharpen innate skills, it develops new skills, adding the wealth of experience to the aspiring leader's arsenal. A grit and growth mindset that understands the importance of learning through adversity, has been the research interest of **Lieutenant Colonel Jennifer Alessio**, a member of the U.S. Army War College Class of 2021. We have invited her today to join us on A Better Peace to discuss her work on the subject and her thoughts on how the Army can better integrate such a mindset into its own training and talent management. Lieutenant Colonel Jennifer Alessio is a U.S. Army Strategic Analyst who has previously served in the White House Situation Room and with the U.S. Army Pacific. After she completes her year as part of the U.S. Army War College Class of 2021, she will begin at PhD program in political science this fall. Thank you for joining us today, Lieutenant Colonel Alessio.

Jennifer Alessio: Well, thank you so much for having me, it's a pleasure.

RG: So Jennifer, what is a grit and growth mindset?

JA: So grit and a growth mindset are powerful tools, and they can really benefit the U.S. Army with a competitive advantage which is really important in today's strategic environment and we should deliberately cultivate them in our organizations and in our soldiers. And grit is passion and perseverance and it requires a sustained commitment over time. This definition of grit originates in the work of Dr. Angela Duckworth and Duckworth found that grit can be developed. We are all born with varying levels of grit, but we can improve how gritty we are. Mindsets are learned beliefs about one's own abilities, and since mindset is a belief, you can

change it. So mindsets can be either fixed or growth and an individual with a fixed mindset believes that their capabilities are set, and they cannot be changed, but someone with a growth mindset believes that they can grow, they can develop, they can get better, their skills are mutable. And mindset originates in the work of Dr. Carol Dweck. So grit really relies on the concept of growth mindset, believing in your ability to get better, and that you might not be able to do it yet, but that it is possible to get better if you work at it. And growth mindset really supports the innovation that the U.S. Army needs to compete and win in 21st century all-domain operations and these are really important concepts that the Army should teach, train and tap.

RG: Jennifer, where do you think we have, to this point, insufficiently appreciated the importance of a growth mindset in Army training?

JA: Sure, so with regard to a growth mindset, it really represents a shift in our focus. So instead of expecting and selecting flawless performance such as, you are my number one officer because you always do things right because you are talented, really, the focus needs to change to accepting risk and challenge to growing, to pushing out of our comfort zones, so this is ultimately going to result in the improved capability that we need to innovate and to compete. So it's just a shift that we need to change to and really, with regard to grit, we need to change from our current focus, which is on the singular aspect of grit. So we either currently focus on passion or perseverance, which are just singular aspects, and we do it early, so we do it in basic training, and it's often imposed from the top down like a drill sergeant telling a soldier, don't quit, you can do it, but it would be much more powerful for the Army to fuse these concepts of passion and perseverance by intentionally teaching and training them early and often, and inspiring soldiers to find them for themselves. And we can really maximize grit and a growth mindset and the U.S. military competitive edge by including them in professional military education, by reinforcing them in our units and by selecting for them in our promotion boards, and they really need to be part of our common lexicon in our cultural narrative.

RG: Where did you first come across these particular works of Dweck and Duckworth but also, when did these topics, grit and a growth mindset, when did they grab your interest? Assuming that this was not the way you were necessarily trained on your way up through the Army.

JA: Sure, so it was really an accident and it was a chance conversation with a mentor for me. So I broke my back as a young officer on an airborne parachute jump and the doctor said that that was career ending for me, but my mentor said to me your back might be broken, but you don't need to be. And that totally shifted my mindset and my approach to my future and my service. So instead of it being terminal from my Army career, I realized that I had a choice about how I approached my health, how I approached myself, and my own service. So it took many years, but I dug into grit, I dug into growth mindset, and I actually started running which doctors said would not be possible for me, and I started running marathons. So now I've run 20. I've

become a running coach and I actually set a goal for myself of running one of the fastest times at 10 miles in Hawaii, and I made a competitive team and I was running with people 15 years younger than myself on this team, and it wasn't talent. And that's a fixed mindset that you either have talent or you don't, but a growth mindset says, you may not be able to do something now, but if you have perseverance and you have the passion over time to see yourself toward a goal, you can potentially get there. And that's what that was, not accepting the diagnosis of a broken back and a terminal career, but rather setting a goal and working toward it. And it's the journey that we should delight in, and there's the competitive advantage, having soldiers that think like that, not quitting.

RG: Wait a second, so you've run 20 marathons after breaking your back?

JA: Right, and that's the power of your grit and growth mindset.

RG: At what stage in your career were you when you had the accident?

JA: It was my very first year in the Army. So it was supposed to have been terminal for me before even completing one year in the Army, but thanks to my mentor—that chance encounter—who said, this doesn't have to be the end, he gave me a new beginning, but I think the Army can be more deliberate in making this part of our culture, part of our doctrine, part of our lexicon—grit and growth—teaching this to soldiers from the beginning at our professional military education instead of just leaving it up to mentors by institutionalizing this in our doctrine—grit and growth—teaching the science-based research. It won't leave it up to chance in just the individual to not quit.

RG: And so I imagine you've spoken to this mentor many times since then, because obviously this is a different mentor, a different commander might have just patted you on the hand and said, well, you gave it a shot and we'll all think fondly of you after you leave the Army. Have you spoken to that mentor specifically about that mentor's decision to encourage you to stay in? Does this mentor have a reputation for doing that with other folks? Have they done it since? And have you specifically talked to them about the impact that whatever advice they gave you back then has had on your career?

JA: Absolutely, and that mentor has been incredibly powerful in my life, and I think that's the goodness of mentorship in the Army and that's the strength of the Army. It's the mentorship and the caring. People is the Army's number one priority. That's an example of how one individual impacted my life. Introducing me to these concepts, these tools that were so important to me, but leveraging these tools, I think institutionally can be huge. It shouldn't just be up to a mentor to introduce these concepts to people. It should be something that we adopt for the Army writ large

through doctrine, through training, grit and growth mindset, just hugely impactful to me personally, but they can be impactful for others and really do make a competitive advantage.

RG: Sure. Now obviously we would not want to wish potentially crippling accidents on all first-year officers, but the interesting question is how would you imagine that this kind of approach, this kind of talking about this mindset and the emphasis on grit, how could we introduce it into the training life of an Army officer and how should we reinforce it? Or should we imagine how we could reinforce it going forward?

JA: Sure. So actually I think that you could use it initially as a recruiting tool. One way to instill grit is to join a culture that is gritty, and the Army is indirectly a gritty culture. But I think we need to market ourselves as a gritty culture, and we do that by acknowledging it to ourselves. And I think individuals are often looking for the place where they can pursue their passion and a place that will really develop their perseverance. So that's the Army. Parents are looking for this as well. First, you sell it to recruits—we are a culture that is gritty—and then you teach it, the grit and growth mindset, early on in professional military education. You do this for both officers and for enlisted soldiers. You teach the work of Dr. Dweck and you teach the work of Dr. Duckworth. You make these part of our lexicon, grit and growth mindset. We should be able to speak to each other in these terms and know what they mean. Then, we reinforce it in our units, and we make these terms part of our evaluations, grit and growth mindset. While they are not easy to quantify, there's something that we can recognize in each other. Are you an individual that accepts challenge? Are you an individual that refuses to quit? Are you someone that has passion for your job, for your service, for your commitment? Can I identify these qualities in you and why do I care about that as the United States Army? Because they are the qualities that will give us the competitive advantage to innovate and to have the imagination that we need to overcome our adversaries. I think that it's hugely significant for us as a service as well as for the individuals that we seek to recruit and retain.

RG: What obstacles do you see to bringing the concept of grit and the concept of the growth mindset into Army talent management?

JA: So first I think we need to change our attitude toward risk, and we need to prioritize accepting challenge. In talent management, to select for grit and a growth mindset, we need to select away from the fixed mindset, but to do this, we need to afford individuals the opportunity to take risks and we need to underwrite their inevitable mistakes, and these mistakes will arise as individuals are stretching and growing and pushing their own boundaries. We need to invest in their skill acquisition and we really need to advocate for them to accept, challenge, to grow, and then we need to promote a culture of personal development. It's absolutely imperative. I talked before about quantifying grit and a growth mindset, it's difficult on an officer evaluation report. You can't write, amount of dollars saved in a grit and growth mindset. You can't assign a number

of troops trained to that, but it is imperative to emphasize the grit and growth mindset. And finally, I think the cultural embedding is another obstacle. We really need to make the Army synonymous with a grit and growth mindset.

RG: Well and what I'm hearing here, part of it is, I remember in one of my first seminars at the War College, we were having a discussion about the problem of zero flaws and people are under this pressure to be 100% zero flaws and I had a naval officer in my seminar my first year and he commented that Chester Nimitz, before he became the famous Admiral in the Second World War, that early in his career he actually ran his ship aground when he was commanding a smaller vessel. And naval listeners can come back at me about whether I got all those details correct. He said that, and then he laughed, and he said, you know, Chester Nimitz would never have made it past the next promotion board if he did that today. This got us talking in general about, was there a time when there was more understanding about mistakes and we don't want anybody to make mistakes, but precisely this problem of admitting mistakes is admitting weakness. And yet, in order to show that we have grit, in order to show that we can grow, we have to admit that we made mistakes and we have to make something of ourselves. How comfortable in your experience has the Army been with people talking about their mistakes, their weaknesses on their way through their careers?

JA: I think that it is the concern about how will my evaluation reflect mistakes. How will I rack and stack against my peers? So if we change the narrative, if we reframe to, mistakes are acceptable and challenge is what we are seeking rather than perfection out of the gate, this is really where the goodness is. If you reframed to, I want a risk-taking innovator, then you will be able to underwrite mistakes, and I think that making mistakes supports the idea of mission command, where you are empowering subordinates to, within guidance, operate effectively, and so making mistakes and operating within boundaries is really part of not micromanaging. So I think it's just reframing that enables this, but the talent management piece is certainly needed where you enable a culture where zero tolerance of mistakes is something that is actually a hindrance to national security. Mistake making enables innovation.

RG: Mistake making enables innovation. I like that idea. So let me ask you about you and your experience. Your current research at the War College. Are you exploring these topics right now in your current research project at the War College? Or do you plan to pursue them in the future?

JA: Sure. These ideas I have certainly looked into, and I've also looked into the idea of mindfulness at the War College and how that can benefit senior military leaders, and how that feeds into leadership success. And it's a related idea, absolutely.

RG: So you are entered into a program through the War College, through the Army, that's going to allow you to go to graduate school and get a PhD.

JA: Yes.

RG: What do you want to do when you grow up now that you are a Lieutenant Colonel who is about to get a PhD?

JA: When I complete the PhD, I'm going to return to the War College and serve on the War College faculty, and what I would really like to do is just continue helping the United States produce strategic leaders that are able to fight and win the nation's wars, that are able to contribute to a better peace, such as we say. I think it is essential for America to operate positively, effectively, and in an understanding manner in the world.

RG: So much of the discussion about grit and about growth is dealing with personal narratives. You've already told us the story about your accident and overcoming that, but at what point in your career did you decide you wanted to move in this academic direction? While you're working as a strategist, was there a particular assignment that you had or a particular moment where you realized that you actually wanted to get into the PME business?

JA: I think that the Army enables personal transformation and there are so many opportunities in the Army that maybe soldiers don't start out realizing are available to them. An opportunity that I had was to serve as an army fellow at the Asia Pacific Center for Security Studies. Serving there I was exposed to security professionals from all over the Indo-Pacific region. I got to lead seminars and, in my seminars, I had students from China and Taiwan, from India and Pakistan, and it was up to me to foster conversation between these places that maybe they were not the on the friendliest of terms. But I see the United States as a positive actor in the world that maybe could shape these conversations and it was just a joy and a privilege to be able to have, to find areas where we could work together. From that experience in Honolulu, it really just lit the fire within me to obtain a PhD in political science and just continue in the academic environment.

RG: And was that your last assignment before coming to the War College?

JA: So my follow-on assignment from that was the Chief of Security Cooperation at U.S. Army Pacific for intelligence. So I was able to travel all throughout the Indo-Pacific and foster security cooperation with our partners, finding ways to work together on areas of common interest. Working together I think is something that the United States is able to do, especially in the Indo-Pacific and United States Army is especially postured to do that.

RG: I usually like to ask this of current students at the War College, how has this year at the War College—because it's a particularly unusual year with COVID, with the remote education—how

has your experience at the War College been? But also, how has it fit in with what you have imagined yourself as part of your development as an army officer?

JA: It has been absolutely phenomenal, and I am so grateful for the opportunity to be at the War College. I think the synergy that the War College has provided, the opportunity to meet officers from around the world, to meet officers from different services, to speak with other army officers, to bring the different curriculum together, and to fuse it with what I've experienced from my own career has been extremely beneficial. I'm grateful for the opportunity. I'm grateful to go study for a PhD and I'm grateful to come back and just to continue, hopefully contributing to the United States Army and to our common mission.

RG: One of the things that will happen, when you're lucky enough, well... we'll put lucky aside here... but when you are teaching at the War College, people are going to ask you, how did you end up here and what did you want to do when you're here. How do you imagine telling the story of your own development as an officer to future students at the War College? They show up in Carlisle or if you're teaching them remotely, but then you will explain to them, this is what happens when you come to the War College, to think of how this fits into your notion of a growth mindset and how one responds to adversity. How would you tell your story?

JA: Well, I think that we must begin with the ending in mind. What is it that you want to achieve? And then how will you get there? And as I said, the Army affords us with so many opportunities, so many opportunities to make a difference in the lives of others, so many opportunities to hopefully help our country and so many opportunities to contribute, I would say to the betterment, hopefully, of the global commons. So it's just a matter of figuring out how do you want to make that difference. For me I think the Army was a different journey than I thought it would be and one that I'm just so glad that I got to be a part of, and it really lifted me, and it lifted my family and I'm just happy to be able to hopefully give back and just to continue to serve.

RG: If you don't mind me going back to the story because I am very curious, what did you think you were going to do when you first joined the Army? For example, were you ROTC? How did you end up in Army Officer? Begin with, what did you think you were going to do when you joined the Army?

JA: Sure. I was, frankly, the person who was never going to join the Army and I joined because my mother made me and there was just not enough money to pay for college and she handed me the ROTC scholarship form and I filled it out. It was just absolutely something that I never imagined myself doing. And here I am 20 years later, just with so much that I have been able to experience and so much goodness for my children. I think it's the gift that has been able to give for the generations, for me, but certainly it is something that has been a sacrifice but has been

extremely beneficial. What I initially was supposed to do was to be an Air Defense Artillery Officer assigned to Korea. When I was told that I could not do that because I had a broken back, I went anyway and that was a little bit of a shock I think for everyone for me to show up in Korea with a broken back and I needed to ask others to carry my bags, which is never something okay in the Army. But I think overcoming your own desire not to ask for help maybe is also part of the grit and growth mindset. Initially asking for help maybe enables you to succeed as well. So I got through the initial part of the injury and was able just to keep going.

RG: And I imagine perhaps, if you haven't already done it, that in the years to come, you may once or twice remind your children that you did what your mother suggested and your life turned out great, so they should do what their mother suggests.

JA: Yes, I tell them that every day and I thank my mom every day. Do what your mother tells you.

RG: With that worthwhile piece of advice, Jenny Alessio, thank you so much for telling us your story and the story of how your grit and how your desire to grow has shaped your understanding of your life in the Army and how things can go in the future. Thank you so much for joining us here on A Better Peace.

JA: Thank you.

RG: And thanks to all of you for listening in. Please send us your comments on this program and all the programs and send suggestions for future programs and rate and review this podcast on the pod-catcher of your choice after you have subscribed, because that helps other people to find us. We're always interested in hearing from you. This conversation is over, but we hope you will join us again. Until next time, from the War Room, I'm Ron Granieri.