

Ernest Benner

The Guy that's Leading the Fight

When Ernie Brenner was in training to become an Army Ranger, he made a mistake.

"Ranger school is a leadership academy," he says. "They load you up with stress—lack of sleep, lack of food, lack of comfort, high mission-driven environment—and you have to operate that way."

Ernie felt that he was performing pretty well under all that stress, but in the last training phase something seemed to be going wrong: he had not yet been put in charge of a patrol.

"That's how they grade you—they put you in charge of a patrol. So it was the last mission before we went in for a resupply. We'd been out six days, so the food was gone, everybody was smoked and sleepy. Everybody else had already been graded, and I pulled the last patrol, which was an ambush with movement through the swamps of Florida, and everybody was just smoked. It was terrible. There was no doubt that I had flunked—you're a no-go!"

The next day during debrief, the Ranger instructor asked Ernie to rate his own performance.

"And I said, well, that's a no-go."

Ernie ran through a list of his failures—"We failed to do this, we didn't do that, we failed to execute here"—and then he braced himself for a good tongue lashing.

"Suck it up, Ranger," the instructor said.

Here it comes, Ernie thought.

But he was wrong. "You're doing very well to have gotten the last patrol," the instructor continued. "That means you're one of the best Rangers here. Tough leaders draw tough missions. You had a tough mission, and you will get other tough missions like this, so don't be afraid."

"That sort of stuck with me," Ernie says. "Demanding tasks come to the best leaders. And that's your crucible. That's your testing ground.

That's when you have to stand up and deliver."

Standing up to deliver in that kind of testing ground shaped Ernie's drive to be "the guy that's leading the fight," and commitment to mission is what led him to his current position at the helm of the Red Gate Group

"How I got here sort of drives why I do what I do," Ernie says. "Growing up in West Virginia, going to the military academy, serving in the army for 20 years, it was always striving for leadership, always striving for command, striving for where you could make a difference. Leading an organization and having that organization define itself for excellence, differentiate itself from others, and deliver the results you need to deliver—it's sort of in the DNA."

Red Gate Group is a professional and technical services consulting company serving clients such as the Department of Defense, the Department of Veterans Affairs, Department of Homeland Security, and the FBI. "Red Gate seeks to make

a difference for our country and our client, and how we do that is by understanding the end-state our client wants to achieve," Ernie says. Red Gate's core services include intelligence analysis, strategic planning, policy development, and technology integration services.

"In the last 12 years, we've established ourselves as a firm that excels in doing startups for government. The clients we seek have critical missions that need to be done now, and where we are best utilized is where there's no organization or structure for that mission. We're able to come in and quickly operationalize a solution and move that client toward their desired end-state."

The company's original focus developed out of Ernie's work on the Improvised Explosive Device Defeat Task Force in Baghdad in 2003. The Department of Defense put Ernie in charge of that project and ordered him to focus on rapid



implementation.

"If something seemed like it would have a success rate in the 80% range, we were cleared to push it into theater." By the time he started Red Gate in 2006, Ernie had a lot of experience integrating useful new technologies with the specific needs of missions, according to the concept of operations. "We knew how to bridge that gap," Ernie says, "and everyone who had an IED solution wanted to hire us."

"I started out as a sole proprietor doing consulting, figuring out the rhythm of the game," Ernie explains, but soon he reached out to Wade Jost and TJ Iak, two other West Pointers with whom he had worked in the Task Force, and they combined their areas of expertise.

"Wade would work the technology aspect, and I would work the con-op—how integration gets done, how this new technology, intel platform, tactic or technique, would fit into that con-op and improve what we were doing," Ernie explains. "That was the business model up front."

The company's name comes from the place where Ernie was living when he launched the company in 2006. "In 2001 I was posted back from Special Forces Group to Pentagon," Ernie explains, "and I wasn't happy to go. Housing prices were trending up, so I called my dad and asked what I should do about a place to live. He was raising cattle on a farm in Clarke County, and he suggested I move there and make the commute. 'Just stay there until you find something,' he said. I wound up staying seven years. In 2006 when we stood up the entity, we named it the Red Gate Group, after Red Gate Farm on Red Gate Road."

Ernie grew up in Charles Town, West Virginia, where his father ran a veterinary practice serving the area's cattle and horse-raising industries. Ernie describes his mother as "a prototypical housewife, with a degree in Home Economics from Michigan State." Both parents were excellent athletes, and they encouraged Ernie and his sisters to embrace the active lifestyle of the Shenandoah Valley. "Riding, roping, fox-hunting, polo-playing—Dad did it all," Ernie says, "and my older sister was an excellent rider, too." Ernie's first paid employment was leading white-water rafting trips on the Shenandoah and Potomac Rivers. In high school, Ernie played basketball and baseball, and got along well with most of his peers. He describes his academic performance as "just below the straight-A range."

In grade school and middle school, Ernie imagined following in his father's footsteps, and as a child he accompanied his father on calls to local farms and racing stables.

"I was the errand boy who would run around the track or the farm—go back to the truck and get this or that."

As a sophomore in high school, however, Ernie came across a brochure from West Point, and it turned his thoughts toward challenge, adventure, and service. A visit to the legendary academy solidified his interest in studying there. "That broke my dad's heart," Ernie jokes. "He wanted me to be a cowboy."

Ernie credits his small-town childhood and his parents with many of the values that shape his world view. From his mother he inherited *joie de vivre*, a ready laugh, and the tendency not to take himself too seriously. From his father he inherited respect for honest hard work and the persistence required to see a challenge through from beginning to end, and a sense of service to others.

"Sometimes we'd be called out in the middle of the night to a farm that was really struggling to make ends meet," Ernie says. "When we were finished delivering the calf or whatever, the farmer would say 'what do I owe you?' and Dad would say, 'Don't worry about it.' And then later we'd hear a knock on the door and find a big bag of vegetables on the porch."

Ernie traces one of his guiding principles to his father's work with veterinary students. "We'd get a call to go see some dairy cow with mastitis or something," Ernie says, "and Dad would ask the intern to diagnose the cow. And invariably the student would come out with a tremendously complex, rare diagnosis. This happened time and time again—horses, cows—and I remember asking my dad at home: why can't these guys do this? And he said, 'Well, they're coming out of a university hospital where they get strange cases, and so they're trained right now to see strange things in everything.' But, he said, in real life you should always go with the obvious. You'll know if you have a strange case because it won't respond to treatment the way you expect, but then at least you've taken away the obvious. Never throw away the obvious at the start."

At West Point, Ernie excelled in military activities. "If it was doing army stuff, I was always near the top," he says. "West Point sets you off on

a purposeful journey.”

For Ernie, that journey lead to the Army’s highest level of distinction: the Green Berets. “At the completion of your first assignment, you can sign up for special forces training,” Ernie explains. “That’s a highly selective process of mental, physical, and emotional evaluation. They’re looking for a certain resiliency that no matter how arduous the task, there’s going to be a commitment to see it through and not quit.”

“In the regular army,” Ernie explains, “when you undergo training, it’s fairly regimented. You’re given a task, condition, and standard. You’re going to conduct a 12-mile road march, carrying 55 pounds, and the standard for completion of this is three hours. In Special Forces, it’s, Hey, you’re going to be doing a long-range movement—do the best you can. You don’t know how far, you don’t know when it’s going to end. They would never tell you the standard, beyond ‘do the best you can.’”

“For example,” he says, “you’re assigned to a team of twelve and you’re given a task like you have to move five-gallon water cans. There’s enough for everybody to carry two, except one guy has three. So you set out to move them, and all you know is I have a certain time I have to make it to the finish line, but you don’t know where the finish line is, you’re just humping along with it. You can’t quit, was the bottom line.”

“The Green Beret is an accepted symbol of excellence,” Ernie says, “a true badge of honor and courage, respected by both friends and enemies—probably more so by enemies,” he says with a laugh. “That’s my network, those are my friends. When I look in the mirror, I see a young Green Beret looking back at me.”

After several years of combat service in Iraq and Afghanistan, Ernie was assigned to the Military College at Fort Leavenworth, first as a student and then as an instructor, and during that time he also enrolled in the MBA program at The University of Kansas. “There’s a lot of opportunity to get advanced degrees in the army because there’s a lot of expertise the army needs to grow,” Ernie says. He was especially excited by a course on entrepreneurship during that program, but when he retired from the Army in 2005 he didn’t see himself as an entrepreneur. “I didn’t write a resume, I didn’t set up interviews, I just went home to the farm, no pure direction like I’m going build a government services company,” Ernie says.

In fact, he thought he might become the cattle baron of the Shenandoah Valley. “I had a business plan for that: low maintenance, low cost, leased land, buying and selling in every market. And a lot of the folks I would approach would be Dad’s old clients.”

“I was out a month, and a retired three-star called me, Soup Campbell, former deputy director CIA. And he said, ‘Hey I have some consulting work and I was given your name so I’d love to talk to you.’ So I started with Soup working an inter-agency project—how the inter-agency could better plan and resource wholly government operations for the war we were fighting. We got to walk the halls of government, at night, seeing the old men of government muscle it around and make things happen. And I listened to their approach for how government should be doing things. That lasted a year. In that time you see the rhythm of the game, you see how it’s going. And then I called my other partners.”

Red Gate currently has about 90 employees and expects to do \$18 million worth of business this year, more than twice last year’s revenue.

“The ideas we deal with aren’t all that complicated,” Ernie says. “We’re a government services company. We do consulting. We work with some technologies that are cutting edge, but the true magic is being able to run it through the government traps so it can get into a mission space and do some good. Now that’s magic!”

Ernie met his wife, Paula, in Germany, on his first assignment. She was a lieutenant working on the same post as a maintenance officer. “The joke was that I always had great equipment readiness because I was dating the shop officer,” Ernie says. He and Paula were married in December of 1989.

“Paula’s a logistician,” Ernie says, “and a great leader. She was stationed all over—Desert Storm, Desert Shield, Somalia, Rwanda. Paula has an enthusiasm and confidence about her, and a straight-forward unflappable style. Liked and respected by all. She could have gone a lot farther in the Army, but she got out in 96, when our first son came along. He’s 21 now and a student in the engineering program at James Madison University. Our second son Jack graduated high school this last June, and we have a 12 year old daughter, she’s sort of the little diva of the family—keeps everything together.”

Now Paula runs the HR department at Red Gate. She's the first person any new hire meets.

Ernie is modest about Red Gate's success. "In the early part of our growth, we got a lot of awards in the Washington area," he says. "We were on the Washington Technology list, the Virginia Chamber of Commerce Fantastic 50, but we've minimized all that because it doesn't fit the culture of what we do. We're not in this for prizes. The customers we seek have critical missions. They have missions that have to be done now, missions that can't fail or there's a large impact. Doing those missions is award enough."

He describes his leadership style as collaborative. "I'm not the entrepreneur with ideas bubbling out of my head all the time," Ernie says. "I'm more the collaborative guy who can take an idea, apply it to the end-state, and marshal the resources—people, money, time—to move toward that."

"Often times in government moving from A to B is a non-linear path, so you have to be able to think your way through that."

Ernie's advice to young people would be this: "You live in a magical time. The opportunity that they have for acquiring a business and being able to chart their own path are unmatched in history. They have this bulge of Baby Boomers looking for next-generation leadership. I see this bow-wave of companies that need to get passed on. So you get in someplace, you understudy for a while, you show you have the chops and you won't crash the thing, and that you can work a

buy-out to keep it as a going concern, and away you go. That's what I would tell today's kids. It's about charting your own path through ownership."

"What I'm especially excited about at Red Gate is the challenge of creating real value. We want to build a company that people want to be in. We want to build an enduring business. And we want to build something with true extrinsic value where people look at us and say, 'Look at the things they're doing and the clients that they're serving and the value they're creating for the nation. That's a good company.'"

"That's the end-state that we're looking for."

© June 2018 Gordon J. Bernhardt. All rights reserved. Reprinted by permission.

— By Gordon J. Bernhardt, CPA, PFS, CFP®, AIF®

About Gordon J. Bernhardt

President and founder of Bernhardt Wealth Management and author of Profiles in Success: Inspiration from Executive Leaders in the Washington D.C. Area, Gordon provides financial planning and wealth management services to affluent individuals, families and business-owners throughout the Washington, DC area. Since establishing his firm in 1994, he and his team have been focused on providing high-quality service and independent financial advice to help clients make informed decisions about their money. For more information, visit www.BernhardtWealth.com and [Gordon's Blog](#).