

NEW EXPANDED EDITION

BECOMING A MANAGER

How New Managers Master the
Challenges of Leadership



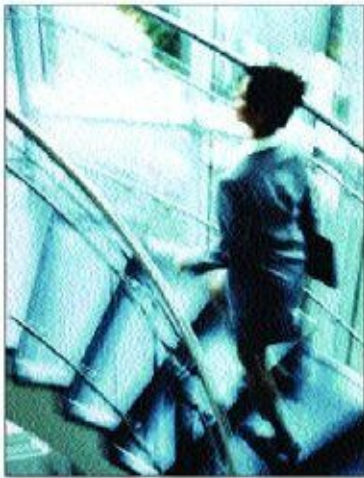
Linda A. Hill

HARVARD BUSINESS SCHOOL PRESS

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To my parents,
Clifford and Lillian Hill,
who encouraged me to be inquisitive
and to have an optimistic outlook on life.

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Preface to the Second Edition

It is hard for me to believe that more than ten years have gone by since I began collecting data for *Becoming a Manager*. At that time, although we knew much about what effective managers did and what they were like, we knew little about how they became that way. My ambition was straightforward: permit new managers to speak for themselves about their experiences of learning to manage and lead. Nineteen new managers allowed me to chronicle the triumphs and tribulations of their first year on the job, and their experiences have resonated with managers around the world. Rarely a month goes by in which I do not hear from a new manager relieved to learn that his or her experience is not unique. As an experienced executive at a *Fortune* 100 company once said to me, *Becoming a Manager* is about the “fundamentals.”

New managers—from a new parish priest in New York to a new R&D manager in Shanghai—report that becoming a manager is a transformational experience for which there are few shortcuts. They often express surprise at how stark the transition from individual contributor to manager actually is, and tell me how relieved they are to learn that others have experienced and worked through the varied intellectual and emotional challenges they confront in their new positions. First-time managers have to unlearn the deeply held attitudes and habits they had developed when they were responsible simply for their own performance.

Prior to a managerial promotion, most people work as “doers,” or individual contributors; their primary responsibility is to perform specific tasks in, for example, sales, engineering, or financial analysis. Their contribution depends primarily on what they do personally, drawing upon their own expertise and actions. Managers, on the other hand, must see themselves as responsible for setting and implementing an agenda for a whole group. To use an orchestral analogy, they must move from concentrating on one task, as an accomplished violinist does, to coordinating the efforts of many, like a conductor. To set the agenda for a whole group and to motivate and inspire others to accomplish that agenda is much more complicated than most people anticipate, particularly in flat, fast-moving organizations. As one new manager remarked, seeing himself as a network builder and a leader was a fundamentally different way of looking at who he was and what he was supposed to do. It meant learning to frame problems in ways that were more broad, holistic, and long-term. It meant learning to cope with the stresses associated with his new position as well as discovering new ways to measure success and derive satisfaction from work. It meant evolving an entirely new professional identity.

In short, becoming a manager demands that individuals engage in each of the three fundamental kinds of learning: learning something new, changing one’s mind, and changing oneself.¹ The learning something-new aspect of becoming a manager (i.e., the task learning) seems to receive the most attention from organizations and academics. New managers find it challenging to develop the myriad of technical, human, and conceptual competencies necessary to be an effective manager. But the vast majority are *more* surprised and unnerved by the unexpected necessity of developing new attitudes, mind-sets, and values (i.e., the personal learning involved in changing one’s mind or oneself) consistent with their new positions. Despite this, managers’ need for personal learning is rarely acknowledged in management books or programs. When new managers contact me, they invariably end up talking with me about [Chapters 6](#) and [7](#) of the book, “Gaining Self-Knowledge” and “Coping with the Stresses and Emotions.” There are still few safe havens for new managers to admit the

deepest fears and insecurities.

WHAT ABOUT LEADERSHIP?

This second edition reflects what I have learned in the process of trying to develop resources for new managers in the intervening years since I wrote *Becoming a Manager*. In that time, I have designed and delivered countless educational programs to managers at my own institution, the Harvard Business School, and for a variety of companies. I was also part of the new technology start-up team at Harvard Business School Publishing that designed our first multimedia distance learning product. Perhaps most importantly, for five years I served as the faculty chair of a new required course on Leadership and Organizational Behavior for our MBA program. The ambition of this course was to prepare our students for their first managerial assignments and help them develop the willingness and ability to learn how to lead over the course of their careers. We took seriously the notion that we could not teach our students to manage—they had to teach themselves. Our primary ambition was to develop a course that would provide the critical resources MBAs would need to capitalize on their on-the-job learning experiences after leaving business school.

Of course, my colleagues and I realized that we could not predict just what those experiences would be. Just think how much has changed in the past ten years. For example, consider some of the new terms that have entered our vocabulary in the last decade: 24/7, e-commerce, virtual teams, and euro, to name just a few. One thing we knew with certainty was that the work of management was becoming more complicated and vexing than ever before. In today's environment, managerial work and especially the leadership functions associated with that work, are key drivers of organizational success. I do not doubt that if I were to study new managers today I would hear much more insistent about "leadership," "change," and "diversity." The ubiquity of these ideas in managerial conversation reflects the most immediate challenges facing today's managers. With increasing globalization and significant demographic changes in the workforce, a premium is being placed on the ability to lead diverse others through turbulent times. Not only do managers need to develop the personal capacity to manage, but they also must be able to create a context in which others are willing to learn and change so their organizations can continually adapt and innovate.

New managers must move beyond the pervasive myth of management as simply coping with the status quo. Too often, managers focus only on execution and handling the complexity of their current assignments, neglecting their responsibilities for innovation and preparing for the future. Organizations must continually revitalize and transform themselves to compete today. Thus, managers must be effective change agents who understand how to overcome resistance to change, deal with the inevitable stresses associated with change, and implement appropriate change strategies.

In the twenty-first century, new managers must be prepared to cope with both complexity and change. John Kotter, a renowned leadership expert, argues that:

Leadership and management are two distinctive and complementary systems of action. Each has its own function and characteristic activities.... Management is about coping with complexity.... Leadership, by contrast, is about coping with change.²

As Kotter goes on to point out, most managerial positions require both types of expertise. His worries, however, that often managers neglect their leadership or change agent responsibilities. Kotter and others argued that in the 1980s and 1990s organizations were too often overmanaged and underled. As a result organizations found it difficult to adapt and change as demanded by the competitive environment. Indeed, as the reader will see, the new managers I studied did not devote much attention to their roles as agents of change. Instead, they saw themselves principally as target

of change, implementing the change initiatives of their superiors. Given the growing scale and scope of organizations today—even start-ups can be global—managers find themselves grappling with much more complexity. This leads me to worry that, too often, organizations today are both underled and undermanaged.

When I published the first edition of this book, some contended that I did not devote enough attention to the topic of leadership specifically. I chose not to because that was not the way the new managers framed their experience—and my first responsibility was to stay rooted in the authenticity of their reported experiences. But of course, leadership, including the functions of setting direction and inspiring others to pursue it, is critical, especially in today's turbulent times. Delving more deeply into this debate is the subject of my next project, in which I move beyond a conception of leadership as managing change to one of leadership as developing culture.

For this expanded edition, when I describe the work of new managers, I mean to include both their management (coping with complexity) and leadership (coping with change) responsibilities. Organizations can only meet the tough challenges of today's environment if they have effective managers—capable of coping with both complexity and change.

Given these challenges, it is no wonder people are less enamored of managerial work these days. Fewer people express interest in becoming managers, noting that today's managers tend to occupy demanding and insecure positions that offer significantly fewer perks than ever before. Furthermore, too many of those who take on management positions only do part of the job, burn out, or drop out of managerial careers entirely. With a global trend toward flatter, leaner, and more agile organizations, managers are trying to cope with the ever-changing marketplace and increasing responsibilities—agenda setters, network builders, and change agents. Countless anecdotes illustrate how the “people issues” continue to grow more complex and demanding. How can managers prepare themselves to take on increased managerial responsibility?

WHY A SECOND EDITION?

While it is gratifying to see that the central themes developed in *Becoming a Manager* have stood the test of time, I have deepened and refined my sense for what new managers need to know and how they can learn it. I did not offer much explicit advice in the first edition about how to handle the day-to-day challenges of management; instead I encouraged readers to learn vicariously from the documented experiences of the nineteen new managers. In this edition, I have tried to address the operational issues raised most by new managers. Their concerns come in many forms, but can be distilled into three basic questions:

- How can I be more effective dealing with organizational politics and in influencing my peers and superiors?
- How can I develop and lead a diverse team in times of change?
- How can I build a successful managerial career?

Thus, in three chapters new to this book, I adopt a more prescriptive approach. I present frameworks and suggestions that have helped new managers cope with these tasks and their associated challenges.

For those of you familiar with the earlier edition of *Becoming a Manager*, the heart of the book remains untouched. The lessons of these nineteen new managers' experiences are as instructive today as when the book was first published. In fact, as you read them you should experience some foreshadowing of the themes elaborated on in the new chapters, which are included in section V of this edition. [Chapter 10](#) focuses on the challenge of dealing with the political realities of organizational life, especially exercising influence with little or no formal authority. [Chapter 11](#) focuses on leading diverse teams. [Chapter 12](#) describes my latest thinking about what managers can do to prepare themselves to lead over the course of their careers. We now know for sure that managers must prepare themselves for a lifetime of learning and personal reinvention. The rate and magnitude of change appear to be escalating. And change not only means leading and changing others, but changing oneself. Hence, building on the political framework shared in [Chapter 10](#), I propose a power and influence model of learning for a lifetime.

In the Epilogue I'll explore what organizations can do to help managers in their journey to lead and learn. When I first wrote *Becoming a Manager*, not much attention was paid to the development of new managers. Instead, organizations focused much of their attention on senior executive development. Organizations now recognize that human capital is a source of competitive advantage. In today's organizations, we have come to appreciate that managers on the front line are critical to sustaining quality, service, innovation, and financial performance. Corporations are beginning to realize the financial and human costs of even one failed manager. Attracting and developing young managerial talent is becoming a critical strategic challenge for organizations that hope to prosper in the years ahead, and there is growing investment in the development of even junior managers. We are finally beginning to take seriously that the first managerial assignment is a pivotal developmental experience for future executives; it is when an individual's basic philosophy and management style are established. In this final section, I discuss some of the latest thinking on these issues and consider how we can nurture and prepare star individual contributors to play critical managerial roles in the organizations of the future.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

When *Becoming a Manager* was first published, I did not realize the journey upon which I had embarked. Much of my professional work in the past ten years has been a direct result of that adventure. Among other things, John McArthur, the former dean of the Harvard Business School, challenged me to apply what I had learned. Serving as course head for the new required MBA course on leadership was my first managerial assignment, and I experienced all the stresses and emotions of the new managers interviewed for this book and made many of the same mistakes they did. Based on their experiences, however, I was able to shortcircuit some of the angst and take to heart the lessons of my missteps. Because we have a very collaborative culture at HBS, I have had the privilege of working with and learning from generous colleagues—many of whom have written more books on management and leadership than I ever will. I am particularly indebted to the teaching group members who supported me through my earliest attempts to lead.

I must also thank the research assistants who worked with me over the years in developing course materials and articles for new managers in the making—the foundation for new chapters of this book. I would especially like to note the contributions of Katherine Seger Weber, Stacy Palestrant, Kristin C. Doughty, and Maria T. Farkas. Jennifer M. Suesse, the assistant director of the Leadership Initiative that I now chair at the school, has been a true partner in this endeavor; her creativity, incisive mind, and gentle prodding have kept this project on track.

Finally, I am indebted to the many managers, new and experienced, who have taken the time to contact me and share their reactions to the book. Their questions and insights are what encouraged me to prepare this second edition.

The first edition of this book starts with a quotation from a new manager comparing becoming a manager to becoming a parent. As I write these acknowledgments very early in the morning, my first child, three-month-old Jonathan, is resting beside me. I see ahead of me a continuing adventure of self-discovery and development.

Preface

The goal in this book is to provide a forum for new managers to speak for themselves as they learn the art of management. Although we know much about what effective and successful managers are like, we know little about how they become that way. Here the odyssey of nineteen new managers during their first year on the job is recounted. Their experiences and observations are instructive, for they give us a rich and textured understanding of the challenges in becoming a manager.

This book is intended for individuals who are considering a managerial career, new managers, and those responsible for developing new managers—line managers and human resource managers—as well as fellow academics and researchers interested in managerial behavior and development. Because the book is designed to appeal to a wide audience, it includes very little technical detail. Those interested in the theoretical underpinnings are encouraged to consult the notes and bibliography. The Appendix includes a description of the research methodology.

The fieldwork for this project was done from 1985 to 1988; analysis of the data and writing spanned an additional three years. A great many people made important contributions along the way. For reasons of confidentiality I cannot thank by name the individuals and companies who participated in this research. I am especially indebted to the managers and their colleagues who gave generously of their time and took me into their confidence. This book is literally theirs, for it tells their stories. My hope is that I have done justice to their collective insights and presented their words as they intended them to be heard. My appreciation also goes to the organizations that employed these managers. They provided access to personnel and confidential information. They supported the project and asked for no feedback or other return.

The individuals who are most familiar with this research and have seen it through from inception to completion are John Gabarro, John Kotter, and Jay Lorsch, colleagues at the Harvard Business School. I am deeply grateful to them. I have benefited from the thoughtful guidance and support of others at the school as well. Samuel Hayes and Benjamin Shapiro assisted me in selecting and gaining access to research sites. Numerous associates reviewed the endless drafts of the manuscript and continually challenged me to refine the analysis and description of my findings. In particular, I thank Anne Donnellon, Robert Eccles, Richard Hackman, Morgan McCall, and Richard Walton. I also express my gratitude to Dean John McArthur and the directors of the Division of Research for offering me the time and resources to complete this work.

For the past few years, I have had the opportunity to present my research at professional meetings and corporate training programs and in a consulting capacity. I acknowledge the countless academic executives, and managers whose observations and questions helped me interpret my findings and ascertain their implications. The confirmation received from the managers I met was most welcome. They reassured me that my findings were consistent with their experiences, helped them better understand those experiences, and suggested things they could do to capitalize on on-the-job learning.

Many have made invaluable contributions to the production of this book. Barbara Feinberg not only graciously shared her expertise as an editor, but also saw me through the emotional travails of writing a first book. My research assistants—Jaan Elias, Nancy Kamprath, and Melinda Conrad—helped me in preparing the manuscript, from locating misplaced references to critiques of the clarity and logic of the argument. My special thanks go to Hilary Gallagher, Carolyn Saltiel, and Ros

Giacobbe and her staff in Word Processing. They patiently typed numerous drafts of the manuscript often under pressure.

I also wish to acknowledge my friends for their good humor and understanding over the years, especially my dear friend, Lorraine Delhorne and my “dinner group”—Judy Bodie, Joline Godfrey, Diana McClure, Janice McCormick, Barbara Toffler, and Rose Zoltek Jick. And, I want to thank my husband, Roger Breitbart, for his affection, unstinting confidence in me, and substantive insights on my presentation and style.

Introduction

*Do you know how hard it is to be the boss, when you are so out of control! It's hard to verbalize. It's the feeling that all of sudden ... it's the feeling you get when you have a child. On day X minus 1, you still don't have a child. On day X, all of sudden you're a mother or a father and you're supposed to know everything there is to know about taking care of this kid.**

This observation was made by a new branch manager in a securities firm. He had been in his new position for only one month. Before promotion he had been a broker for thirteen years. He was a star producer, one of the most aggressive and innovative brokers in his region. Neither he nor his peers were surprised when the regional director asked him to consider a management career. New branch managers were generally promoted from the ranks for competence and achievements as individual contributors.

He thoroughly enjoyed being a broker, and had never seriously considered management. The money had been “real good” for the past few years. He worried intermittently, though, about burnout from the unrelenting pressure—“Will this bull market last forever?”—or boredom as the years went by. Reflecting on the four branch managers for whom he had worked, he concluded he had some insight into what it took to be an effective manager. In fact, several times he had commented that if he had been in charge he would have known how to fix things so that he and his fellow brokers could perform to their full potential. He decided to find out more about the branch manager opportunity, and eventually chose to pursue it. When the branch assignment came through, the branch manager took him out for a congratulatory lunch and welcomed him to the “big leagues.” Over the next week, as he distributed his clients to other brokers, he felt moments of intense panic, but there was no turning back. He was giving up his “security blanket.” After a short time on the job, he lamented that he might have “bitten off more than he could chew.”

That experience is by no means unique. Indeed, the promotion to manager is a pivotal juncture in a business career, for both the individual and organization. It is frequently both a reward for good performance, and also a means by which to infuse talent into the managerial hierarchy. But the odyssey from individual contributor to manager is often difficult, full of horror stories about promising careers that wither along the way. In spite of their established qualifications as individual contributors, many new managers never adjust successfully to managerial responsibilities. First-line management is the level in the organization from which come the most frequent reports of incompetence, burnout, and excessive attrition.¹ The human and financial costs are staggering for both the organization and those who fail to make the transition.² Even those who make it find that the first management job remains a potent memory as long as 25 years later.

Despite its ubiquity and importance, we know surprisingly little about the transition to management. Very few have studied the manager's earliest experiences—the first months or year on the job.³ This is the topic of this book: What do new managers find most challenging? How do they learn to be managers? On what individual and organizational resources do they rely? Although the shelves are stacked with descriptions of what effective and successful managers are like, there are few

books on how they get that way.

THE NEW MANAGERS

This book follows nineteen managers through their first year. All participants were new sales and marketing managers, fourteen men and five women. Ten were branch managers in a securities firm and nine were sales managers in a computer company (see Appendix for a detailed description of the participants and the research methodology).

Before the promotion to manager everyone in the study was an individual contributor, otherwise known as a specialist, producer, or professional. Their primary responsibility was to perform specific technical tasks; their contribution to the organization was *individual*, depending primarily on personal expertise, experience, and action.⁴ In contrast, a manager is formally in charge of the organization or one of its subunits. His or her primary responsibilities include supervising others rather than directly performing technical tasks. The distinction between individual contributor and first-line manager is often blurred, for first-line managers often perform technical work. It is the formal authority over others and the attendant rights and duties that differentiate the manager from the individual contributor.

The new managers were first-line field sales managers in their organizations. They were directly responsible for day-to-day management and supervision of field sales representatives in their territories and were accountable for achieving specific sales and marketing goals. The job descriptions for both included developing the sales organization; creating a healthy work environment; establishing standards of performance; evaluating, rewarding, and developing subordinates; acting as liaisons between their unit and others in the company; interpreting and enforcing corporate policy; and representing the company to the community. Neither group had responsibility for specific accounts, but they were expected when necessary to call on clients with the assigned sales representative.

Both groups worked for *Fortune* 500 corporations. By almost any financial indicator, the companies were leaders in their industries. They were, however, undergoing significant change in response to an increasingly competitive and volatile business environment. Consequently, managerial roles in both companies were becoming more complex and demanding. Managers were held accountable for a broader array of financial, strategic, and human resource outcomes. They were asked to pursue not only short-term financial objectives, but also long-term strategic initiatives. They were expected to focus not only on revenues, but also on profits. The securities firm, after deregulation in the financial services industry, was moving from a product to a service focus. The computer company had recently instituted programs on cost control, service, and quality. Both companies consequently emphasized providing leadership, developing subordinates, and maintaining long-term partnerships with clients.

The securities firm managers (SFMs) and computer company managers (CCMs) and their positions differed significantly. The SFMs were managing retail salespeople who were independent players selling an intangible product (financial instruments) to individual and small business accounts. The CCMs were responsible for institutional salespeople who sold large data-processing systems to commercial accounts. They were members of a sales team that included systems analysts and administrative and operations personnel over whom the CCMs had no formal authority. The SFMs were general managers, with profit-and-loss responsibility for an entire branch. They were expected to plan strategy and execute programs for their work units. The CCMs, though, were responsible only for the sales function; most of their goals were still revenue and not profit-oriented. They were expected to build sales and marketing programs for their unit consistent with the branch strategy. The span of authority and autonomy, and hence the change in position, was much greater for the SFMs than for the CCMs. Not surprisingly, the SFMs had more experience as individual contributors than did the CCMs.

Despite these differences, the new managers provided strikingly consistent accounts of their first-year experiences.^{*} We examine these recurrent themes in the managers' first-year biographies in the following pages.

FINDINGS

Although countless articles and books offer counsel on how to develop managerial talent, few have been based on empirical research. And few look at the phenomenon from the new manager perspective or consider on-the-job developmental experience.⁵ Most are how-to manuals outlining the knowledge a manager needs about the content of managerial work. Most treat management development from the single dimension of task learning: acquisition of necessary competencies (the knowledge and skills necessary to fulfill managerial functions) and establishment of key relationships. Becoming a manager is largely presented as an intellectual exercise, albeit a demanding one.

A pointedly different dimension in the development of a new manager emerged from the research described in these chapters. Here, new managers speak for themselves as they learn a new craft. Their experiences and impressions unveil a richer understanding of the challenges. Listening to them, it becomes clear that the transition to manager is not limited to acquiring competencies and building relationships. Rather, it constitutes a profound transformation, as individuals learn to think, feel, and add value as managers (see Exhibit I-1).

The new managers described the transformation vividly, weaving tales of coping with the stress of transformation, reluctantly letting go of deeply held attitudes and habits, and timidly experimenting with new ways of thinking and being. They discussed not simply what happened, but how it felt.

Exhibit I-1

Transformation of Identity

From

A specialist and doer. Directly performs specific technical tasks. Strongly identified with those tasks.

An individual actor. Gets things done mostly by one's own efforts. Strongly identified as relatively independent.

To

A generalist and agenda-setter. Orchestrates diverse tasks, including finance, product design, and manufacturing or organization. Strongly identified with a business or the management profession.

A network builder. Gets things done through others, including subordinates over whom one has formal authority. Strongly identified as highly interdependent.

The managers began to make the psychological adjustment as they tried to make sense of and struggled with their new gendasetting and network-building responsibilities. As an outgrowth of taking action, they mastered four tasks of transformation:

- Learning what it means to be a manager
- Developing interpersonal judgment
- Gaining self-knowledge
- Coping with stress and emotion

Through on-the-job experience they began to understand and accept their new responsibilities (learning what it means to be a manager) and to acquire the task (developing interpersonal judgment).

and personal (gaining self-knowledge and coping with stress and emotion) competencies necessary to meet them. The managers' expectations of their new job were incomplete and simplistic. They had to reconcile these expectations with the daily reality of managerial life and with the seemingly unending and confusing demands of their new subordinates, bosses, and peers. Over time the managers began to develop personal theories of management: a set of assumptions and hypotheses about the managerial role. They became aware of these theories as they reflected on their actions and decisions. In turn, these theories came to guide their future behavior. Unequivocally, the managers asserted that the most demanding task learning of the first year had to do with the "people challenges." Through the problems they encountered and their interactions with others they began to develop interpersonal rules of best managerial practice. But it was the personal learning more than the task learning that the managers found most unsettling. The first year of management was a period of considerable introspection and personal growth. They matured as they confronted previously undiscovered truths about themselves and were relieved to see that adults like themselves do change and develop. Not surprisingly, a major order of priority was learning to cope with the stress and intense emotions associated with their new position and the evolution of a new professional identity.

Although it was possible to distinguish conceptually among the four tasks, the managers dealt with and learned about them more or less simultaneously. By "learning," I mean the sort of learning after which an individual conceives of something in a qualitatively different way, and which has a lasting influence. Moreover, this learning goes beyond the intellectual sense: it involves being acquainted with something experientially.⁶ The lessons were learned as the managers confronted the daily litany of interactions and problems in their new assignments. And they were learned incrementally, gradually. Sometimes the managers were aware that they were learning, but most often they were not. The learning consisted principally of "gradual and tacit change"; with the accumulation of evidence and experience came the erosion of one set of beliefs, attitudes, and values and buildup of another.⁷ The building-up process was one of iterative refinement and revision. Warren Bennis, an authority on managerial learning and development, writes, "A person does not gather learnings as possessions but rather becomes a new person with those learnings as a part of his or her new self."⁸

Like individuals who must suddenly face the transition to parenthood, the managers had to learn on the job, and it was a critical and overwhelming job at that. They were responsible for the lives of others, yet they had to make decisions and act before they understood what they were supposed to do. And like new parents, the managers were transformed by the experience. As they confronted and mastered the challenges, they came to view themselves and the world differently.

Most of the new managers in this study were successful. Of the nineteen, their superiors felt that all but three "made it" through the first year. In other words, they were well on their way to making the fundamental transformation required. But even for this group, the first year was neatly summed up by a manager who had served in the Navy: "It was one hell of a tour of duty."

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