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PERSONAL EXPERIENCE PAPER (DESERT STORM)

COVER SHEET

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From 1989-1991, I was assigned as an Advanced Individual Training drill instructor to the 301st Military Intelligence Battalion, Detached at Goodfellow AFB in San Antonio, Texas. Prior to this assignment, I had completed two overseas tours; one as a communicator assigned to US Army Field Station Korea at Camp Humphries, the second as a 98G Voice Intercept operator (German language) assigned to the US Army Field Station Berlin. My tour as a drill instructor was my first significant experience in a direct supervisory role over large numbers of junior soldiers.

US Army trainees at this installation consisted primarily of those attending technical training for the Voice Interceptor and Intelligence Analyst courses. As high-demand occupational specialties, course throughput was relatively high, with platoon sizes averaging 50-60 personnel with one drill instructor assigned to each platoon. Students in these specialties were generally very bright; a characteristic which brought its own special challenges as most were all-too-willing to question any guidance that was not absolutely clear, complete, and logical.

During the initial months of my tour, life for both cadre and students was busy, if not hectic. Little did we know that the nation's military was about to respond to Saddam Hussein's aggression in the Middle East following his invasion of Kuwait on 2 August, 1990. Less than one week later, US Forces began deploying to the region. Following the UN resolution authorizing the use of force in November 1990, coalition forces launched an air campaign in January 1991 followed by the introduction of ground forces in February 1991. These events combined to add a new sense of urgency, and some anxiety, to the student's curriculum.

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The change in mood among the student body following the onset of DESERT STORM was quite remarkable. Where once they had been relatively carefree and disinterested in larger military matters, trainees began demonstrating a keen interest in the war and in their preparation for it. Most, especially those whose specialties were to be the Middle East and Arabic language, began taking their training that much more seriously. These soldiers committed themselves to graduating on time so that they could also do their part in the fight. Many expressed a desire for the “war to last long enough for me to get in it”. They spent extra hours in study hall, increased efforts during physical fitness training, and viewed marksmanship and other combat skills training, which occurred with increased frequency and intensity, with renewed interest.

However, as is usually the case, the Desert Storm coin had two sides. It was also during this period that the US Army decided to eliminate the requirement for certain European languages. This change affected approximately one-third of the students attending Voice Interceptor training. These students had already completed language training and were now facing a choice between returning to the Defense Language Institute for several more months of instruction in a new language, retraining in a different Military Occupational Specialty, or leaving military service.

Approximately half of these students chose to leave and return to civilian life. I’ll confess that I was somewhat shocked that so many opted out. Projecting my own reasons for joining the military onto these young soldiers, I had expected the vast majority to willingly accept retraining and remain in Service. Many of those who chose to depart, stated that the only reason they had joined the Army in the first place was for the education benefits. As they would be allowed to retain these benefits after being

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discharged, many of these students felt no need to stay; in fact, they jumped at the opportunity to achieve their goals while avoiding the commitment they had signed up for. For our part, we drill instructors were told to do nothing to sway their decisions. This was a difficult position to be in, as many of these young troops showed significant promise. Apparently, the US Army felt it had abrogated the soldiers' contracts by eliminating the jobs they had signed up for and did not want to pressure them to remain. I cannot help but feel that an open and frank discussion between these young troops and experienced soldiers might have resulted in retention of at least some of these students.

While never expressed, I couldn't help but wonder if the war also played some role in their decision to leave. Perhaps the daily images of combat, seeing friends depart for, and return from, the theater of operations, as well as the urging of family members eager to keep their soldier safe, had more to do with these decisions than we will ever know. Perhaps the war drove home the seriousness of the military as an occupation to those who may have viewed it as little more than a means to pay for college.

On the positive side, over half of this pool of trainees chose to stay. They accepting retraining in languages and specialties almost certain to take them into harm's way. Many of these soldiers are probably senior enlisted men and women in the current fight in Iraq and Afghanistan. When given a choice between the easy and the hard way, they recommitted and moved on.

Desert Storm also impacted the cadre. Considered essential to the war effort, all instructor positions were frozen. Many submitted requests to deploy, wanting to do their part in the war, however, each request elicited the same response: your value to the US Army is as a trainer, putting competent soldiers on the battlefield. Denied! Personally, I

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accepted the logic of the Army's position on this issue, however, it caused no small amount of consternation among some of my fellow instructors who felt they were being denied what might be a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to take part in combat operations.

We had little time to dwell on personal complaints. In the months leading up to the coalition counter-offensive, the detachment saw student throughput nearly double. At one point, my platoon numbered over 100 soldiers, all requiring at least as much, if not more, attention than they had before the threat of war. Managing this number of troops proved to quite a challenge. Already long work-days stretched well into the evenings in an effort to complete the myriad time-intensive tasks young troops require. Counseling sessions, common task training and testing, physical training, all manner of inspections, soldier competitions, promotion boards, extra duty, charge of quarters responsibilities, etc, all continued as before. However, most of these tasks now required at least twice as much time to complete.

Soldiers had to compete for limited resources. This was especially impactful when it came to their technical training. Practical limits on space and work stations forced students to study in shifts. Study facilities remained open around-the-clock, however, cadre encouraged trainees to make every effort to complete these tasks as early as possible in order that they might get a good night's sleep, essential for success in a very demanding course of instruction. Many students chose to skip meal breaks in favor of study time in order to avoid late nights in the school house.

While most unit cadre came from a military intelligence background, a few of our drill instructors were combat arms specialists. These individuals played a key role in improving our common task training which, frankly, had been viewed by most (myself

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included) as events with little practical application to the strategic assignments many of our students faced prior to DESERT STORM. The trainees, formerly bored by oft repeated instruction in what seemed like mundane, useless tasks, demonstrated a renewed interest in learning skills now viewed essential to keeping them alive.

Those instructors with an infantry background were especially instrumental in retooling common task training and testing events to make them more applicable to the situation faced by our students. These instructors, some of whom were veterans of Vietnam and Granada, were able to put this training in context in a manner those of us in intelligence could probably never have achieved. They analyzed all of the shoot, move, and communicate tasks and ranked them as to their relative value to a deploying MI soldier. Troops were allotted increased time on the range as well as additional ammunition. Land navigation opportunities increased in both realism and difficulty, with soldiers now conducting this task in the surrounding desert/wilderness environment with the accompanying challenges of extremes in temperature and weather conditions.

In the end, I look back on this period of my career as an extremely positive experience. Though I was not able to participate directly in DESERT STORM, I felt that we played an important part in ensuring that the soldiers who came through our schoolhouse were properly prepared to do their jobs under the most demanding conditions. This was reinforced by those former students who took the time to write, call, or visit and who related their experiences and expressed appreciation for the training and encouragement they had received.

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Desert Storm: Ten Years After

Electronic Briefing Book

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