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My Tour as a USAREC First Sergeant

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Iowa City, Iowa, 08/19/2002 – 07/09/2006

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15 September 2006

Class 57

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### Abstract

I learned an enormous amount about leadership during my four-year tour as the Company First Sergeant for the Iowa City Recruiting Company. I learned something from every person I encountered. I observed both effective and ineffective leadership. What follows are some of my experiences and what I believe a leader should be, know, and do.

## My Tour as a USAREC First Sergeant

Before I discuss my experiences during my tour as a First Sergeant, I must first give you some background and my assignments in the United States Army Recruiting Command (USAREC). My experience leading up to First Sergeant totaled 10 years in USAREC and 15 and 1/2 years in the Army. I held all the normal positions, both leadership and staff, before my assignment as First Sergeant. The Army selected me as a detailed recruiter in 1992 and I attended the Army Recruiter Course in Ft. Benjamin Harrison, Indiana that same year. Upon completion of the Army Recruiter Course, I began recruiting in the Albuquerque Recruiting Battalion in Albuquerque, New Mexico. I served there as a Field Recruiter from December 1992 until June 1995, first in the Albuquerque East Recruiting Station and then in the Albuquerque North Recruiting Station. The Army closed the Albuquerque Recruiting Battalion in 1993 and the Albuquerque Recruiting Company became part of the Phoenix Recruiting Battalion, whose headquarters was located in Phoenix, Arizona. In June 1995, I began working as the Station Commander for the Carlsbad Recruiting Station in Carlsbad, New Mexico. I served in this position for the next 18 months. I relocated to become the Station Commander of the Carlisle Recruiting Station in January 1997 and served in this position until December 1998. In December 1998, I began duty as a Guidance Counselor at the Albuquerque Military Entrance Processing Station. My next assignment was as an instructor for the Guidance Counselor Course at the Recruiting and Retention School at Fort Jackson, South Carolina. This was my last assignment leading up to my First Sergeant assignment. Each of these assignments and the Soldiers I met shaped my leadership philosophy. Some leaders, through their actions, showed me what right looked like. They also trained me in the right way to lead Soldiers. Still others showed me exactly the kind of leader I did not want to be. I will only give the names of the

leaders who led in a positive way. For the bad leaders, I will only give an account of the events. Their names will remain confidential. Before I go any further, I must give you a definition of leadership. FM 6-22, 1-6 states, "Leadership is influencing people by providing purpose, direction, and motivation while operating to accomplish the mission and improving the organization." Nowhere in this definition of leadership are the words threaten, coerce, or belittle.

CSM David Swartzentruber, 1SG Peter Fargo (now CSM(Ret.)), and 1SG Charles Evans were the most influential leaders during my assignments in New Mexico. 1SG Evans, a former Infantry Soldier, had a sharp tongue, but he always found a way to leave things on a positive note. 1SG Evans had the loyalty of his Soldiers because he was loyal to them. He was always available to help. He also took the time to know the family members and called them by their first name when he met them. While he may have been hard and demanding on the job, he let his Soldier know he cared about both them and their families. The leadership trait that 1SG Evans passed on was to be loyal to your troops and they will be loyal to you. 1SG Fargo was a lot different from 1SG Evans, but just as effective. He was a very spiritual leader, but he did not attempt to impose his beliefs on his Soldiers. I never saw 1SG Fargo lose his temper. He was always in control. 1SG Fargo taught me calmness. CSM David Swartzentruber became the CSM for the Phoenix Recruiting Battalion in 1993. In my opinion, he set the standard for leadership and the professional noncommissioned officer. He is, without question, the most knowledgeable leader I have met in the profession of recruiting. He believed that in order to be successful, you must surround yourself with good people. However, he did not think you had to fire less capable leaders and replace them. He believed he should train these junior leaders. However, he was not one to tell his First Sergeants to train their junior leaders and then assume they did it. He held centralized training every quarter and taught a majority of the classes.

This positive leadership influenced my decision in a big way when it came time to decide whether to convert to cadre recruiter or return to my primary MOS. CSM Swartzentruber counseled me about my decision in 1994 and probably influenced my career more than any other leader.

When I was first assigned as a First Sergeant, I had ideas of what a First Sergeant should be and how I should lead. Those I had been fortunate to work with had shaped much of what I believed. CSM David Swartzentruber, CSM Peter Fargo, CSM Martin Wells, and 1SG Charles Evans were probably the most influential people in shaping my leadership beliefs. They were all knowledgeable, professional, and caring leaders. They believed, as I do, in treating Soldiers and noncommissioned officers with respect. They believed in guiding, mentoring, and training them to lead the next generation of our Army. I was fortunate to have CSM Martin Wells as my Battalion CSM for the first 2 years of my assignment as First Sergeant. I learned from CSM Wells how to allow your junior leaders to take responsibility for their positions and do their job without micromanaging them. I learned that if you always stand over them and tell them everything, they would never grow in knowledge or ability. In addition, I learned that you motivate Soldiers by letting them know you will not ask them to do something that you would not do or have not done.

My experience as a First Sergeant with CSM Wells as the Battalion CSM was a positive one. CSM Wells allowed my fellow First Sergeants and me to run our companies. Because of his leadership style, four of his six companies achieved mission success our first year together. The Des Moines Recruiting Battalion also achieved mission success for the first time as an organization and moved from number 41 in the nation to number 5. The noncommissioned officers in my company followed up the next year by achieving top company in the battalion.

CSM Wells' style of leadership allowed the First Sergeants and junior leaders to grow in ability and confidence. I was also fortunate to have an outstanding Company Commander. We worked very well together and spoke as one voice. Our Soldiers knew that we had their best interests at heart and that we would take care of them and their families. Numerous command climate surveys during our tenure reflected these sentiments from our Soldiers.

Unfortunately, not all people in leadership positions share the same views on leadership. I stop short of calling these people leaders. During my tenure as First Sergeant, I encountered senior noncommissioned officers in leadership positions who made comments to their junior leaders such as "Repeat after me. Would you like fries with your order?" The senior noncommissioned officer asked this question after constantly belittling the junior leader in a public forum. I have encountered a senior noncommissioned officer who stated immediately upon his arrival that he would probably have to replace 70 percent of the junior leaders. The senior noncommissioned officer made this comment without having any knowledge of the junior leaders. What happened to observing, determining needed improvements, and then training junior leaders to meet the standard? It does not take much of a leader to relieve someone. It does however, take a solid leader to train a junior leader and make him better. I experienced senior leaders who could not remain professional when times got tough. They would require recruiters to stay in the recruiting station until after it was too late to call prospects and then continue to search the streets until 2400. This would be after the leaders themselves left to go home at 1700 to 1800. Unfortunately, many senior leaders fail to think rationally when the pressure to produce increases. I have also encountered senior noncommissioned officers who made inappropriate remarks towards their Soldiers and their Soldiers' family members. Some of these same senior noncommissioned officers fail to meet height and weight standards or pass the

Army Physical Fitness Test (APFT). These same leaders tell their subordinates they pass both, but they never do so in front of their troops.

Our junior leaders and Soldiers expect and deserve professional leadership from their senior leaders. My experience as a First Sergeant taught or reinforced the following leadership lessons. First, I am no better than anyone, but I am as good as everyone. Be in charge when you are in a leadership position, but do not put yourself on a pedestal. When your organization achieves success, give the credit to your Soldiers. You must lead from the front. Always let your Soldiers see you doing the right thing. Let them know you are in the fight with them and that you are not asking them to do anything that you would not do. Second, as leaders, we must treat everyone equally. This does not mean to treat everyone the same. Every Soldier you have under your charge will be different. Therefore, treat them as individuals. Third, do not micromanage. Give your junior leaders the opportunity to learn and grow. Remember, you cannot do it all. Let them surprise you with what they can do. Fourth, do not belittle your Soldiers. Counseling is a one-on-one process. If you must say something negative to one of your Soldiers, do not do it in a public forum. Your Soldier may not like the negative counseling, but he or she will respect you for the manner in which you did it. Fifth, if you have a Soldier who is not performing to standard, try to train him before you consider relieving him. It takes very little leadership to relieve someone. Sixth, meet the same standards you ask your Soldiers to meet. Meet these standards with everyone watching. No one can question you when you do. Last, do not lose your military bearing when you are promoted to the ranks of senior noncommissioned officer.

You must decide to be a good or bad leader. I ask myself two questions after I complete each assignment. Would my supervisor hire me again? Would my Soldiers work for me again? If I can answer yes to both of these questions, then I did my job, and I took care of my Soldiers.

Reference

Army Field Manual 22-6. (2006), *Army Leadership*, Headquarters, Department of the Army