

ATSS-DAS

MEMORANDUM FOR Commandant, United States Army Sergeants Major Academy, Fort Bliss, Texas 79918-8002

SUBJECT: Access Agreement for Release of Student Writing Assignment Personal Experience Paper (PEP).

1. I, Lawrence Williams, submitted a (PEP) to the United States Army Sergeants Major Academy archives regarding events and experiences that may be of historical significance to the United States Army and the Noncommissioned Officer Corps.

2. I understand the manuscript and attached documents will be accessioned into the historical holdings of the United States Army Sergeants Major Academy archives and will belong to the United States Government to be used in any manner deemed in the best interests of the United States Army as determined by the Chief of Military History or his representative. I also understand that I may retain a copy for my own use subject to classification restrictions.

3. I hereby expressly and voluntarily relinquish all rights and interest in the paper to the United States Army with the following caveat/exception:

() ALL: Initials

~~()~~ NONE: Initials

4. I understand that the information in this paper may be subject to the Freedom of Information Act, and therefore, may be releasable to the public contrary to my wishes. I further understand that, within the limits of the law, the United States Army will attempt to honor the restrictions I have requested to be placed on this material.

Date: 3 Dec 2010

Student Printed Name: Williams, Lawrence H.

Signature: [Handwritten Signature]

Accepted on behalf of the United States Army by:

SGA Printed Name/Date: Ron Mateen

Signature: [Handwritten Signature]

Cultural Insensitivity During Iraqi Freedom V

MSG LAWRENCE H. WILLIAMS

USASMA

Leadership Applied

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Ronald Matzen

Cultural Insensitivity During Iraqi Freedom V

My battalion command sergeant major from my last tour of duty in Iraq was one of the most difficult command sergeants major I have ever worked with. As his headquarters company first sergeant, I wasn't worried about his temperament so much. I believed I could work around his temperament. It was my belief that in order for us to enjoy a successful training cycle and our subsequent tour of duty in Iraq, he and I needed to foster a good working relationship based on mutual respect, open communication, honesty, and cooperation. I learned over the next few weeks about his arrogance and obvious lack of any semblance of team building or organizational leadership skills. These shortcomings were bothersome, but over my 20 or so year career, he would not be the first know-it-all I have worked with. My major challenge became clear after a conversation he and I had one day during one of his "take the gloves off" conversations. I became convinced this man was a blatant racist. I chose not to turn him in. I made this choice for three reasons. I did not believe the system would take any action. An investigation right before our deployment would do more harm than good. It would finally come down to his word against mine and I would lose out.

This was my second tour as a first sergeant and was one of the most challenging assignments I have ever experienced. I was responsible for a headquarters company in a brigade special troops battalion. The company had seven platoons and just experienced a complete turnover of leadership. Every one of the platoon sergeants, platoon leaders, the executive officer, company commander, and the first sergeant had left during the month subsequent to my arrival. In addition to a total makeover among company leadership, the following month the new battalion command team arrived. Most of the Soldiers were in the company were about to begin the train-up for their third deployment and morale in the company was horrible. Although most

of the leadership indicators suggested mission failure, I was confident the commander and I could deal with all of the challenges discussed and accomplish our mission successfully. The commander and I completed our assessment and our road to war began. We believed in our unit and were ready to go. Within a short time, our Soldiers became a team and we were off to the field to face our wartime validation team from the national training center. A lot is learned about a person when they are outside of their comfort zone. I always believed it takes pressure to make a good diamond, but pressure can also bust a pipe. Once we deployed in the training environment, we learned a lot about our sergeant major.

During one of our equal opportunity classes, the battalion sergeant major came in to check on training. My equal opportunity representative was giving a class and the assistant instructor briefed the battalion sergeant major on what was going on. The sergeant major waved me over to ask me a question. He told me to make sure the instructor uses the word “nigger.” I was sure this guy lost his mind at this point and I explicitly asked him. “Did you lose your fucking mind”? Instead of backing down and excusing himself and his lack of sensitivity, he started to explain why he thought this was important. “Look Will,” he explains, “you know you guys use that word all the time and there is no reason why we shouldn’t get it out in the open and have an open discussion about the use of the word.” I could not believe my ears. I did not lose my temper, and explained as rationally as I could why that word offended me. It also offended me that he assumed that the word was part of my vocabulary simply because of my African American heritage. Just because that word is accepted in some forms of popular culture does not excuse us as professionals from using that word in any form nor should one think that what is seen on television or heard on radio defines an entire culture accurately. I was livid. I must admit, this is about the time I started to hate this guy. This was the first instance I should have

reported him to our brigade equal opportunity representative. My objectivity was gone, but at this point, I was still able to hide my disdain for him, or so I thought.

We got through the training and validation with an excellent rating. The command sergeant major and I managed to stay away from each other. Most of the other first sergeants within the battalion noticed a rift between the sergeant major and me. On the surface our unit seemed to be running smoothly but I believed I was about to go to war with a racist battalion command sergeant major and I took no action to alleviate the problem. My plan was to act as a buffer wherever possible. After all, I was the headquarters company First Sergeant. I arrogantly thought I could handle him.

During the holiday exodus, my father suffered a major heart attack and had to undergo quadruple bypass surgery. I was already on leave but I still notified the Red Cross and my battalion sergeant major of the situation. The sergeant major never asked about my father's condition. His only response to my phone call was to explain the loco-parentus policy within the battalion. There would be no authorization for emergency leave for people who did not raise you in the home where you grew up. I had a feeling where this was going, but I asked him to clarify what that policy had to do with me. The sergeant major assumed that since I was African American, and as far as he was concerned, most African American fathers did not raise his children; my father's emergency surgery would not qualify me for emergency leave. I explained to the sergeant major that my father raised me. I also told him how ignorant and insensitive his comments were. This was when I first started to understand that he was not your run of the mill racist. His racism was not hate or fear based. Here was a person who formed his cultural paradigms, in a large measure, by stereotypes. Over a period, those stereotypes, left unchallenged became his reality. The mind has a way of seeking reinforcement of accepted

beliefs and ignoring evidence of any reality that challenges those beliefs. Once I came to this understanding, my hate for him melted into pity. What a cowardly way to live. He was afraid to challenge his own perceptions and assumptions about people different from him. Almost like a child afraid to go to sleep, fearful of what bad dreams may come and disrupt his fragile comfort. With this new understanding of the man I was dealing with, I still faced the same dilemma. I could ignore the problem in hopes our battalion would manage despite the obvious cultural ineptitude and racist views of our command sergeant major or confront the problem head on. We deployed in January 2007.

An incident happened about halfway through the deployment that let me know beyond any doubt I should have followed the Army's equal opportunity reporting policy. One of the missions of the battalion was to provide a personal security detachment to the brigade commander, the brigade command sergeant major, and the brigade deputy commander. One of my MP platoon squad leaders was the platoon sergeant responsible for all of the brigade command's personal security details. Each security detachment had a squad leader in charge. One of the security detachment Soldiers found a doll with a noose around its neck in his bunk. The Soldier reported it to my MP squad leader and he told me about it. I immediately informed my commander who informed the battalion commander. The sergeant major conducted the investigation. The allegations were true. The guilty Soldier received a negative counseling statement and told not to do anything like that again. His defense was that he was just joking around and people should lighten up. The sergeant major agreed with these findings. I talked to the brigade sergeant major and voiced my objection to the outcome of the investigation. The brigade sergeant major told me I was overreacting and to stand down. I ignored the brigade sergeant major and notified the division sergeant major. The division appointed an investigating

officer and the case was properly investigated. The Soldier was guilty and later relieved of his duties. The battalion sergeant major received a reprimand for not following equal opportunity policy.

I should have reported the command sergeant major to the brigade equal opportunity officer and let the establish process work itself out. I had no right to take matter into my own hands when it is regarding the Army's equal opportunity program no matter what. It's a reason we have the program and trained personnel who will implement the policy. Because of my inaction Soldiers suffered violations of their rights and dignity. I inadvertently contributed to a command climate that at its highest levels was not practicing the army's equal opportunity program. It does not matter whether I think someone is a racist because of hate or merely ignorance. It does not matter what I think. My duty is to be thoroughly knowledgeable about the army's equal opportunity program and to report violations of that policy to the equal opportunity officer within my unit.