

Life in the Army

MSG David M. Cummings

Army Career, 12/05/1984 – 07/10/2006

68W5M

1 October 2006

Class 57

Abstract

Life in the United States Army has continuously provided knowledge and skill, and the experiences one can obtain are unlimited. Generally, my experience in the Army is in three phases. The first phase was in the Regular Army as a Signal Corps Soldier, followed by the United States Army Reserves (USAR) as a Medic in a Troop Program Unit (TPU). My current phase is still in the USAR Medical Corps, but now as an Active Guard/Reserve (AGR) Non-commissioned Officer.

Regular Army

Basic Training. On 5 December 1984, I reported to Fort Jackson, SC for Basic Training, and my experience in the United States Army began. Although my parents raised me to respect others and be responsible for my actions, this would be the first time others would hold me accountable for the actions of those around me. As a squad leader, the position challenged me to motivate other individuals to meet or exceed the standards. This was a new experience for me; my success being measured by the performance of my squad – they failed, I failed. I invested many hours on my team with the hope that everyone would get through this journey together. Through hard work and dedication, we succeeded, but most important, I earned respect as a leader from my subordinates. My desire to excel was ignited by this experience, and I was motivated by my squad to set goals high and give it my all.

Advanced Individual Training. With this new lit flame, I went on to Advanced Individual Training at the U.S. Army Signal Center, Fort Gordon, GA., where I received training as a Tactical Microwave/Satellite Radio Systems Operator. I did not have a leadership role, but I was motivated just the same. By this time, I was taking pride in everything I did; I wanted to be the best Soldier possible. I took advantage of every opportunity to learn, focusing on the skills that I would need to perform my duties. At the end of the 26 weeks, the course recognized that I exceeded the standards, and designated me as the distinguished honor graduate for my class. It was now time to move on to bigger and better things.

Rapid Deployment. I did a Permanent Change of Station (PCS) to Fort Campbell, KY to find out that I had no job there. I was disappointed; how could the Army make such a mistake? My dreams of going air assault came to a quick end, and back to Fort Gordon I went! Although this

was a discouraging time, this mishap turned out to be possibly the best thing that ever happened to me as a Soldier.

I was assigned to the 67th Signal Battalion, which was a rapid deployment unit. In Charlie Rock (C Company), I quickly learned that my experience didn't measure up to the Soldiers around me. While intimidated by this professional atmosphere, the leadership quickly took me under their wing and started developing me. The standards were extremely high, and average was not acceptable, but my NCOs encouraged me not to quit, and motivated me to give 110 percent effort. The genuine concerns of the leadership made me feel a part of the team immediately. Over the next ten months I continued to learn from the Army's best NCOs, and through counseling, goals were set. The goals were difficult to reach, but they were realistic, and every time I would meet one, the bar would raise. After 14 months in the Army, my platoon sergeant showed his confidence in me by making me a team chief of three other soldier and over a million dollars worth of equipment. Apparently the command could recognize my desire to excel, because they had the confidence to schedule me for the Primary Leadership Development Course (PLDC) and Basic NCO Course (BNCOC). Needless to say, it was expected that I graduate with honors – I made the commandant's list at PLDC and was the Distinguished Honor Graduate at BNCOC. Finally my time was up in Charlie Company, it was time to go. I had come to the unit inexperienced and was leaving with the experience of many great NCOs. *NATO*. A Company, 97th Signal Battalion (Coleman Barracks) GE, was my next assignment. "A" team was a North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Although it was classified as an elite assignment, the standards were considerably below those I was accustomed to, but it provided a great opportunity to apply everything I had learned at the 67th. After completing my initial assessment, I determined morale and motivation were low. This did not surprise me since

there was no evidence of goal setting; Soldiers were not challenge to meet standards, let a lone exceed them. The environment was very relaxed; most Soldiers were on a first name basis. I refused to become a part of this chaos, so I immediately started counseling Soldiers on their job description and the expected standards of their performance. As the Soldiers met the standards, I applied positive reinforcement, and set new goals. This accomplishment of success – exceeding standards- raised morale, and motivation was striving. I did my best to lead by example, and once my soldiers realized that I too lived by the sword, I earned their respect. During my stay in Germany, I continued to learn to be a better NCO. I learned by my mistakes, along with those mistakes of others. The valuable lesson I learned is that you learn not only from the good leaders, but also from the bad.

Staff Position. My last duty assignment on Regular Army was with the Commanding General of the Signal Corps., Fort Gordon, GA. I had always thought a staff job was an easy assignment where your success was measured by who you knew, verses what you could do. This assignment proved to be challenging, and the hours were long and demanding. I had the opportunity while working at a Major Command level to receive mentorship from the senior leaders; the best of the best – the Commanding General, the Chief of Staff, the Signal Corps Command Sergeant Major, and many others. I gained great insight to the dynamics of the Signal Corps and Army. I have always been thankful for this experience, and I believe the lessons that I learned gave me an advantage that directly contributed towards continued success.

USAR TPU

Medical NCO. Upon completion of my active duty obligation, I agreed to be transferred to a TPU instead of the Individual Ready Reserve. The Army retained me for 13 more months, and in return, I got trained as a medic. I gained limited experience in the USAR as a medic.

Learning how the Reserves worked was an overwhelming experience. It seemed that everything was 180 degrees opposite of what I knew. But after struggling for a year as a leader, I learned a valuable lesson - only effective leadership is good leadership. You can be textbook perfect as a leader, but if you are not effective, than you are worthless. I finally realized that my goals were not realistic, due to the many obstacles that a reserve unit faces. I had to develop steps to success, while remembering we needed to be as a unit. Change in the Army Reserves seems to be very slow, but if you count the number of training days, we accomplish a lot in 24 days (One calendar year).

AGR

Training NCO. I transferred to the AGR program in January 1997. I still did not work as a medic, but every assignment had a new experience. My initial tour was with an Installation Medical Support Unit as the NCO, but the unit only had two fulltime support members, so I had to be proficient in many arenas – Personnel, Finance, Supply. Although this unit was superior in their technical skills, they lacked much in the Soldier arena. I teamed up with another NCO, and we came up with a plan to get the unit on track. The first two objectives were Military Bearing and Physical Fitness. We demanded respect and courtesy for all, and professionalism was a must. We conducted NCOPD monthly after we completed the Battle Assemblies, and the Soldiers had gone home. It was not long before the NCO corps was on board, and progress was evident. Physical Training was rigorous, but leaders lead by example, and every month we got more proficient as a unit. Once we conquered the two objectives, we had a unit with a can-do attitude, and no obstacle could stop them.

Training Manager. My next assignment was with 5th Medical Group as an individual training manager for an eight state region. This assignment was probably the most rewarding in my AGR

career. I have always felt the greatest responsibility a leader has is taking care of Soldiers, and most important part of readiness is duty qualification. In this position, I was able to identify those Soldiers in need of formal training (MOS, NCOES, and OES), and as the quota manager, I constantly networked with other organizations to obtain the required seats. I developed a Memorandum of Instruction on the individual training management process for all of our down-trace units to use. During my stay at 5th MED., we had the highest quota usage rate, and the lowest no-show/return rate in the 81st RSC.

SEA. I was promoted 1 April 2003 to Master Sergeant, and I was transferred to North Atlantic Regional Medical Command as the Senior Enlisted Advisor (SEA) to Clinical Operations. The thoughts of a regular Army assignment were very exciting, since this is where I began. Besides the SEA responsibility, I was responsible for the deployment of Medical Corps Officer, and Physician Assistance. This was a difficult position; in one hand you had the requirement for health care professionals to take care of the returning wounded Warriors, but on the other you had the need to provide health care in theater. For three years this job seemed like the movie “Ground Hog Day”, everyday appeared to be a repeat of the previous. Although I was ready to deploy to Iraq or Afghanistan, the Army never choose to mobilize me. My effort in sustaining the fight was total dedication to ensuring the right doctor arrived at the right location, at the right time.

ISG. October 2005, CSM of the USAR approved my selection as a First Sergeant of a new command, AMEDD Professional Medical Command (APMC), in Atlanta, GA. First Sergeant positions in the AGR program are new and rare, so being selected was a dream come true. In the middle of my PCS, I was selected to attend the resident Sergeant Major Course, but HRC still allowed me to report. Initially I felt guilty since my tenure would only be seven to eight months

long, but once I reported, I knew I could play a major role in standing up this command. APMC proved to be a unique assignment for a 1SG; it's a Colonel Command without a Headquarters Company. Prior to my arrival, the acting 1SG was attempting to manage the command as a company, causing extreme difficulties in the directorates. I quickly realized the leadership required was not that normally associated with a 1SG, so I immediately met with the commander to obtain her vision and to discuss my position. With each directorate having on Lieutenant Colonel as the Officer in Charge, and a Master Sergeant as the NCO in Charge, I recommended my position be that as a SEA. After obtaining the commander's approval, I implemented the plan, which immediately developed team integrity. Although all my experience seemed to be tailored to this command, it was my knowledge of staff and command that presented the highest payoff.

Conclusion

I have been in the Army for 22 years, and every assignment continues to be exciting and challenging. From the Signal Corps days to my present duty as a student at the U.S. Army Sergeant Major Academy, I have always gained knowledge and skills from my fellow Soldiers and our endeavors. I make every effort to share my experiences with those around; knowing that we all can never experience everything the Army has to offer.