

APPENDIX C

One Soldier's View of His COHORT Unit

PROLOGUE

The people I work with . . . we all knew we were going into a COHORT unit . . . and we knew that the people we would be living, working, and sleeping with during the difficult conditions at basic training were the people we would be with for the next three years. That started cementing our relationships right away. Basic training is stressful, and because everybody pays for one person's mistake, we got real close. Very close. And that carried us through just about everything we did. We all really wanted to do well and do well as a unit. We had a lot of heart-to-heart talks at night. We were always trying to help each other. We were like family . . . a special relationship that I haven't shared with anyone else.

Because of our experiences in basic training, we expected that our new leaders would be able to do everything better than we could. And we were expecting a lot of charisma.

THE MEETING ENGAGEMENT . . . CULTURE SHOCK

When we got to Fort Oral, we were very much looking forward to getting on with the job that we had joined to do. We met our NCOs for the first time. It was one group meeting another, and it was pretty much "us-them." They had none of the shared experience we had, and of course we already knew each other. We knew nothing about "them." But we could look at ourselves, especially within platoons, and we could tell you everything about each guy . . . hometown, mother's maiden name, problems, strengths, and weaknesses.

But these new squad leaders, platoon sergeants, and platoon leaders made us uncomfortable . . . because of their rank. In those days, we held rank in awe. Now, we understand it. Our unit leaders weren't out of the same mold as

our drill sergeants and officers at Fort Benning. They were much older than we were accustomed to, and less charismatic. We had come from a place with very high standards, and we pushed ourselves real hard. We wouldn't accept anything less than perfection from our leaders.

That may have been unrealistic. No one sat us down and explained that our leaders were going to be human.

At first, they didn't want to relate to us on a soldier-to-soldier basis . . . and that's how we were working. . . .

Sometimes, we'd catch them in contradictions . . . and that doesn't breed trust. They were little contradictions . . . something as small as a standard not being adhered to by all . . . like relaxed standards for officers and NCOs. Or, the mindless series of changes that seem to be standard in our Army. It takes twenty changes to get something accomplished. To a young soldier, that kind of contradiction and indecisiveness translates to incompetence, whether actual or perceived. They had to keep coming back and talking to us . . . information had to start flowing in both directions.

And here in our unit, the pace of life is much less hurried, less structured. It was like culture shock when we got here . . . a completely different environment. We were given very high standards to meet . . . barracks maintenance, personal appearance, decorum . . . all these things that help build discipline. But that's not what we were looking for . . . not then . . . we wanted sincere caring, because that is what we felt for each other. They only cared about the mission . . . we cared about the mission and each other.

We wanted to learn a lot, and do a lot. We had a lot of misperceptions about what our battalion was going to be like. We had been told a lot of things. A lot of times, authority figures have to bear the effects of those rumors. We heard all kinds of things, and the leaders picked up a lot of the psychological blame and some undeserved mistrust because of that. Plus, they were already outside our group.

The first time it became apparent that some of our standards and their standards weren't the same was our first PT run. We ran our NCOs into the dirt. We thought that if that was the way it was going to be, it was going to be easy. At the time we were looking at them and saying

to ourselves that the NCOs couldn't do what we were doing. So, they were losing our respect during the very time they were trying to build us. Lack of self-confidence causes lack of candor.

It wasn't lack of competency . . . it was a lack of physical ability. There's a difference. Their knowledge and skills were at least as good as ours, if not superior. In fact they were miles above us. But, on a physical level, which is the standard we had equated everything to up to that point, we were stronger. Everyone we had followed up to that point physically did everything we did . . . and did it better. The first thing we found when we got here was a flaw. They couldn't best us physically, and yet they were trying to lead us.

And "they" also found out that mass punishment doesn't work on a COHORT unit . . . the troops just turn off to the leaders.

So in the initial months, the gap between the COHORT soldiers and the leaders didn't begin to close. It got bigger.

Then our leaders began to challenge us, once they had found out what our level was. That was the best thing they could have done. And they got help . . . from an unexpected source.

THINGS GOT WORSE BEFORE THEY GOT BETTER

After we had been here for about six months, things had changed . . . we were no longer two distinct groups . . . our unit was actually three separate groups . . . the COHORT soldiers, the NCOs and officers, and the newly promoted corporals selected from our ranks. We were effectively functioning, but as a result of soldiers' pride and the fact that we are duty bound. We joined the Army realizing that we have a duty to our country and that everything we do is mission-oriented. And we try to accomplish every mission, regardless of the complaining and moaning. But, it still took a long time for the gap to begin to close.

The newly promoted NCOs had the worst job you could ever hand to a man in his life. Most did remarkably well . . . the others are coming along. They will all turn out to be good NCOs. They had it really tough, and that's when

things were really at their worst. We had morale problems, but we kept it in the ranks . . . we've got our pride. We wouldn't let our frustration out and adversely affect our unit.

The gap will never close . . . not because of anything that has or has not happened. Officers are officers, NCOs are NCOs, and troops are troops. You can join them all together, but you can never turn them all into one great big group.

BRIDGING THE GAP

The young corporals . . . the ones our leaders had made from nothing . . . were the catalyst to bonding us together. Though they were pretty much just like us, they began to go out and look for more to know. They went to schools and started reading on their own. They started asking questions of our leaders and getting together to work with each other. They were getting a lot of pressure from the ranks and from above. They were catching it from all sides.

But they weren't going to hand those stripes back. No way.

From the very start, the new corporals were welcomed into the NCO fold and treated every bit as an NCO, not an "acting jack." Steps were taken to ensure that their role was separate and well defined. That took some very far sighted thinking by the old man.

Then there was the competition among themselves . . . not to be a dud, especially as a corporal. They became like a fraternity and relied on each other. They had the support and commitment of the senior NCOs too.

They started earning our respect when they knew their job and ours, too. They began to learn how to lead. Our senior leaders were teaching them daily how to be leaders . . . about leadership characteristics and attributes . . . and they backed the corporals. If we screwed with a corporal, we got it with both barrels from the senior leaders.

So, our resistance to the young leaders dropped as they exceeded our standards for competency, applied those competencies, and began to lead by example. When the corporals got confidence in themselves, we got confidence in them, too.

And today we have shared enough experiences with our senior leaders . . . enough that we have learned their strengths and weaknesses and can fit them into our group.

Now, we have confidence in them, too. They are more candid with us today. Once our confidence in them developed as a result of demonstrated competence, candor developed. If we listened to them, nine out of ten times we come off looking good. They know the right way to train and do things.

We discovered that they were competent, and we began to accept them and to listen to them. In about the eighth or tenth month, we began to think of them as *our* leaders, because they had committed themselves to us.

No, the gap will never close, But it's been bridged. The three groups have disappeared. That's why we're as effective as we are today.

TODAY

Our concern has become "Let's get this thing done and not get anyone hurt." We won't quit. When everyone else depends on each other, performance rises way above what you thought you could do. Now, we'll do anything for each other . . . not for God or country . . . but for the guys that we have shared experiences with . . . troops and leaders alike.

Our leaders have learned to balance mission and soldiers. Some didn't like it at first. The young NCOs have helped create that because they had a lot in common with the troops and now they have a lot in common with the senior leaders. All the leaders understand that if we are going to accomplish our mission, us soldiers have got to be there.

Candor is 100 percent. The young leaders can talk to the old leaders and be heard. We can be heard.

The leaders were encircled and accepted into our group. They've come around to our way of thinking. We're beginning to realize some of the potential in COHORT soldiers.
