



SMA Holds First Pentagon Town Hall

NCO Journal

For the first time, the Army's senior enlisted advisor hosted a town hall meeting for Soldiers who are stationed at the Pentagon.

Sgt. Maj. of the Army Raymond Chandler spoke Monday to about 350 Soldiers in the Pentagon auditorium, to remind them about what it entails to be a part of the Army profession and to relate his own story on seeking behavioral health care. Soldiers at stations at the Pentagon don't normally get the messages Chandler takes to installations throughout the world during his travels.

"The overarching theme is that the Army profession demands character, commitment and competence from our individuals and to use that connection for some of the challenges our Army faces such as sexual assault, suicide and hazing," Chandler said. "Each one of those is something we can influence and change if we try to remember who we are and what we say we are as professionals."

In other words, he asked the standing-room-only

crowd to review who they perceive themselves to be.

"This is about living the creed, and the first line says no one is more professional than I," Chandler said. "Do we walk it? That's my challenge today for you; to consider whether you are truly walking and living the creed. Because character, commitment and competence defines our professionalism."

The SMA also addressed suicide, a topic that is high on the list of Army senior leadership priorities.

"I see suicide and our ability to reduce suicide in the Army as a direct reflection on our professionalism," Chandler said candidly. "I believe suicide is preventable. As a professional Soldier, you're expected to perform at the highest level of any human being. You're expected, without hesitation, to take another human being's life. You might have to do it not once, not twice, but as many times as necessary. That takes a huge toll on the human body and on the mind."

The difference between a Soldier and a policeman, he

added, is that in just about any city across the country, the act of pulling a firearm and firing it, even without hitting anybody, means a visit to behavioral health care counseling. It's part of the employment contract, he said, because the expectation is that firing a weapon will take a toll on police officers, affecting their mental health, and possibly leaving them less healthy than before the event.

Chandler, a veteran of nearly 32 years, acknowledged that Soldiers have a difficult time seeking behavioral health counseling.

"We're generally expected to look someone in the eye, through the sight of a rifle, then pull the trigger," he said.

But when Chandler tours installations and posts, he relates his own experience in behavioral health care counseling, something he sought after recognizing his own mortality while deployed to Iraq in 2004. He'd just returned from a patrol and was about to relax when a 122mm rocket zipped in and exploded.

"It knocked me around a bit," he said. "But more importantly, my whole sense of 'I'm the man,' came crashing to the ground. I'd seen death and got pretty scared so what did I do? I stuffed my feelings, a classic example of something many men do."

He said the feelings about what happened in Iraq built up in him over time.

It wasn't until 2009, when he found out he'd been selected to be the first noncommissioned officer, or NCO, commandant of the Sergeants Major Academy, that he imploded. He recognized that his success or failure was going to make a statement about NCOs. He said he wasn't sure he could do it.

"Nobody saw what was going on," he said. "I didn't have a battle buddy. I started on this downward spiral that was really affecting my marriage, my children, my own quality of life. I got to a pretty dark place, but in the end I got the help."

Chandler said he followed through on a commitment to himself to seek out behavioral health counseling, something he stuck to twice a week for the next two years.

Before his tour at the academy ended, he was interviewed for the SMA position by then Chief of Staff of the

Army Gen. George Casey Jr. The general asked Chandler, in so many words, if he had any skeletons in the closet that could cause embarrassment to the Army.

"I told him I'd been in behavioral health care counseling for two years," he said.

Chandler said Casey asked him if he'd be comfortable sharing his experiences in behavioral health care with other Soldiers, saying it would be good for the Army, and Chandler agreed.

"I believe that if a senior leader can choose a person like me to be the Sergeant Major of the Army, then there really is no stigma except for what we make up ourselves," Chandler said. "The chief was a professional and walked his talk. So for each of you in this room, I guarantee there's someone who needs to talk to a behavioral health care specialist. Do it. You can get better and continue to move forward and be successful within your profession and your career after the Army."

The SMA next addressed sexual assault, playing a video highlighting former women Soldiers who had been sexually assaulted, raped, and either reported their cases, but were fundamentally told to let the incident pass or didn't report the incident because they didn't trust the chain of command. Either way, leadership failed the victims, he said.

He asked the NCOs if they'd ever had anything stolen by a fellow Soldier. Most everyone raised their hand. Then he asked a master sergeant if she'd reported the incident. She said no, because she didn't trust the chain of command.

That's a typical story and pretty sad, Chandler said.

"We get angry or upset when something is stolen by another Soldier. We should be furious about the fact that we have fellow Soldiers perpetuating criminal behavior on fellow Soldiers, stealing a person's dignity and respect, something that cannot be replaced, because it's not a material item," he said.

Chandler reminded the NCOs that commitment to their Soldiers is a tenant of the Army profession.

Army News Service contributed to this report.



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