



I appreciate the bond we developed as a team and how close we became at one point. (Photo courtesy of 1st Sgt. Roberto Castaneda Jr.)

My Time On Top

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When I took responsibility for the 978th Military Police Company, I recognized the importance of establishing priorities to cultivate a culture and climate conducive to personal and professional growth. Despite not being a well-known or competitive unit like Liberty or Campbell, I knew success hinged on morale and team cohesion.

My commander and I identified our unit's center of gravity as our source of strength that would drive transformation. At Fort Liberty, I saw firsthand how a simple saying could motivate Soldiers. Our "FEAR NONE" mantra was our battle cry, driving our unit's leadership development, professionalism, deployability, and readiness. But we had to figure out how to actually achieve this. After nearly 30 months as a first sergeant, I

realized it was easier said than done.

Before I became first sergeant, I talked with some of my mentors. They told me to remember my experiences as a junior Soldier and change now what I wished to change back then. They emphasized the need for urgency. This resonated with me after reading John Kotter's "Leading Change: Why Transformation Efforts Fail" (Kotter, 1995), which was crucial to our unit's eventual success.

My peers and senior leaders often suggested complying and fulfilling the "18-24" or "KD time" - key development time, a term typically used by officers and senior NCOs. This mindset, focused on merely completing a tenure by doing the bare minimum, indicated a full lack of commitment.

Before taking on the role, I told my wife, "I just want

to be a first sergeant." She would wisely reply, "You should aim to be a good first sergeant. There's a difference." Her words were a driving focus, and I was determined to be outstanding for my Soldiers, regardless of the cost or time involved or the friction with others it caused.

No Monkey Business, Only Fear None Style

Discussing my approach with a former brigade commander, he advised against "Monkey Business," referencing an Army Press Online Journal article, "Understanding Organizational Climate" (Walker, 2016). The challenge was changing the "that's how we've always done it" mindset. I wrongly assumed physical, mental, and deployable readiness was a norm in the Army, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Forming a strategic vision and initiatives, I realized that spirit mattered as much as readiness. Our "Fear None" attitude permeated every aspect of our work life. Instead of standard greetings, we used "Fear None," the louder the better. We also branded every initiative with "Scorpion," our unit mascot, to bolster our identity.

Building My Coalition

I was fortunate to have insightful platoon sergeants who understood what was needed. They led by example, fostering initiative at every level. Building my team from the top down, I recruited sergeants first class and staff sergeants for key roles. Ensuring the right rank for each position was crucial. It impacted how failures were reflected in performance evaluations and drove healthy competition.

For team leader positions, I insisted on sergeants, not specialists. Leadership failures at this level could significantly impact junior soldiers, who deserve guidance from experienced sergeants, not just available specialists.

Bottom-Up Leadership: Officers Need Mentorship Too

Every Soldier has a sergeant, and officers are no exception. My success hinged on a great team, including officers. TC 7-22.7, the Non-Commissioned Officers Guide (Department of the Army, 2020), emphasizes mutual trust and common goals between officers and NCOs. My experiences with executive officers and commanders were generally positive. I focused on not compromising them and maintaining their integrity and loyalty to me and our unit. Advising my commanders to prioritize Soldiers over appeasing higher echelons was a

principle I stood by, even though it often led to friction. But, as we all know, what's right is right, no matter the consequences.

Working with platoon leaders (PLs) was slightly different. The biggest challenge with PLs was breaking bad habits and establishing mutual trust. I guided and mentored them, bridging generational gaps and resistance to orders. One of the biggest challenges was getting them to understand my power and authority as a senior NCO. This also meant teaching junior lieutenants my role as the first, trusting in my years of experience to help guide them.

For the most part, I was successful in my approach to building professional relationships with platoon leaders, but much of the fog and friction was because of generational gaps and why we chose to serve. This also included occasional resistance when taking orders I relayed on the commander's behalf.

When we disagreed or they didn't agree with my recommendations, I told them one thing: If they can't go to the battalion commander about the issue, is it really an issue, or are they just complaining about having to do it because a first sergeant said so and not the commander directly? Funny enough, I never had a platoon leader go to the battalion commander during my time as first sergeant.

Committed vs. Compliant

To establish the 978th as a premier Military Police Company, we focused on building cohesive



Our rotation to the National Training Center (NTC) tested not only unit's limits, capabilities, training, and equipment, but tested us all physically and mentally. This picture was taken when we got out of the "Box." Though this training was tough, I appreciate how close it brought the members of our unit together. (Photo courtesy of 1st Sgt. Roberto Castaneda Jr.)



I would not have been successful without the unit's outstanding NCOs. During my time as the company first sergeant, on rotation in Korea, I sponsored five NCOs into the prestigious Sgt. Audie Murphy Club. (Photo courtesy of 1st Sgt. Roberto Castaneda Jr.)

and disciplined teams. We initiated various Soldier-led programs, fostering teamwork and discipline. These initiatives included volunteer days, mentorship programs, and excellence awards.

Incorporating new soldiers into our culture was critical. I made it a point to understand their family situations and clarify upcoming unit activities. This approach and regular briefings and recognition built real commitment and camaraderie instead mere compliance.

Winning Matters

I constantly reinforced the importance of winning, as highlighted in FM 7-0: Training (Department of the Army, 2021). We were recognized as the Forces Command (FORSCOM) Eagle Award winner and Maj. Gen. Harry Hill Bandholtz Award winner, best Military Police Company in all of FORSCOM and the U.S. Army for 2021. Our unit's recognition was a testament to our dedication and "Fear None" attitude. It demonstrated our high level of professionalism and dedication to excellence.

Climate and Culture - Developing Future Leaders

Creating a culture of trust and confidence was paramount. I maximized every leadership opportunity to foster unit readiness by teaching my NCOs and officers to consistently set conditions that enabled personal and unit readiness. I wanted my leaders to know that every move, decision, training opportunity, or lack thereof, ultimately affected the organization's climate and culture at their respective echelon.

This began with accountability formations and physical training, setting the tone for the day and demonstrating commitment with leaders out front. These shared experiences promoted bonds and deeper relationships with the units. This is essential for shared trust, effective leadership, and Soldier development.

Ready Today, Ready Tomorrow, Sometimes Ready?

Readiness was non-negotiable. Our motto, "Ready Today, Ready Tomorrow, Always Ready," embodied our commitment to maintaining the highest readiness standards. Being "Ready" means more than just showing you're green. It means that if your unit is called, you can leave now without asking for time to get ready. There are huge second and third-order effects for failing to meet readiness standards that impact far beyond your respective company, and my unit felt this ripple effect several times.

The current operating environment demands our leaders be resilient and adaptive when it comes to readiness initiatives. This required a team approach as we climbed to 99% compliance rate in human resource metrics, 98% medical readiness rate, and 99.31% Soldier deployable rate across our unit's population, all of which were the best statistics for any unit in the brigade.

Holding our medics, maintainers, supply, chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear (CBRN) team and admin clerks responsible for their respective categories by allowing them to create buy-in and get the unit where it needed to be ultimately made us successful.

The unit's readiness was tested numerous times as we participated in border support operations with ready personnel, a no-notice mission where we supported Operation Allies Welcome during the Afghanistan refugee crisis, National Training Center Rotation 21-10, and eventual U.S. Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM) rotation to the Southern Korean Peninsula. We were always ready, no matter what. And our efforts resulted in successful participation in various missions.

People First, Always, No Matter What

Embracing the "People First" initiative, I addressed



The commander negotiated the “belly over” obstacle while I coached him through it. It highlights the “lead from the front” mentality we instilled in our officers and NCOs as well as their ability to use every opportunity to build shared experiences with their Soldiers. (Photo courtesy of 1st Sgt. Roberto Castaneda Jr.)

counterproductive behaviors at all levels. My approach centered on enforcing standards and discipline to build cohesive teams and protect Soldiers from harmful influences.

I took charge of my unit as the Vanessa Guillen case unfolded. I vowed that my proactive initiative meant helping Soldiers not become another Army cliché or catchphrase, so I focused on Soldiers and junior

sergeants, not just senior leaders. This was my biggest test during my time as a company first sergeant.

According to former Army Chief of Staff Gen. James C. McConville, “Our Soldiers, Civilians and their Families deserve to work and live in safe, healthy environments where everyone is treated with dignity and respect. People First is our top priority” (McConville, 2021).

Though many different respective installation initiatives promote people first, I believe many senior leaders believe we must “coddle” Soldiers. But I focused more on the This is My Squad (TIMS) initiative promoted by former Sgt. Maj. of the Army Michael Grinston aimed at building more cohesive units across the Army and empowered NCOs by giving them the leadership skills they need to anticipate issues and address them efficiently (Kowalski et. al., 2021).

This meant enforcing standards and promoting disciplined initiative to build cohesive teams, which ultimately takes care of Soldiers in the long term. It also meant fixing toxic behavior at every level of our formations, not just those in senior leadership positions.

Conclusion

Reflecting on my tenure as a company first sergeant, it was the pinnacle of my career. I embraced every challenge and opportunity to develop my Soldiers, preparing them for battle and life beyond the Army.

My advice for first sergeants, now and in the future: your Soldiers always come first, prepare for combat, and you’re not their friend, you’re their leader, and that’s the world’s most amazing and important responsibility. ■

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