



Spc. Kalisber Ortega and her leaders joked that *PFC* stood for “Perfect for Cleaning,” but their mentorship ensured she knew her role was far more significant. Good leadership is what truly defines a Soldier’s journey. (Photo by Chago Zapata)

Perfect for Cleaning

By Spc. Kalisber Ortega Santiago

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I joined the Army in search of a brighter future for my partner and me, not knowing how much I would grow along the way. What began as a leap into the unknown turned into a journey of unexpected challenges and personal transformation.

As a native of Puerto Rico, I spent nearly three years of college there, constantly changing majors (after discovering I hated them mid-course). I didn’t know what I was doing with my life. Joining the

Army was my way of seeking something more stable and fulfilling — not only for me but also for my partner and our marriage.

My first night at reception was terrifying. The strict environment and intense stress apparently made me deaf: I couldn’t understand a word of English for the first couple of weeks. Spanish is our first language in Puerto Rico, and the educational system doesn’t emphasize conversational English. Most of

what I knew, I learned on my own. But at reception, my brain hit reset. I just nodded, said, “Yes, drill sergeant,” and followed someone who seemed to know what they were doing.

Once the worst was over, I no longer regretted this life-changing decision. My body and mind got used to the military lifestyle, and Advanced Individual Training was a breeze.

Because of my Military Occupational Specialty, my experience in the Army has differed from that of my peers. I work closely with my staff sergeant, a unique arrangement that gives me unparalleled access to his guidance. I would barely speak to him in a typical unit, so I consider myself lucky to have such an experienced Soldier right by my side.

Our team consists of only five members: two exceptional civilian leaders, two Soldiers, and me, the private first class. This close-knit environment has given me remarkable experiences and knowledge I wouldn’t gain anywhere else.

Under the guidance of my staff sergeant and sergeant first class, I learn invaluable lessons that extend beyond Army protocols. The two of them have taught me not only the technical know-how required for my role but also essential life skills that have shaped who I am today. They identify my weaknesses and constantly challenge me to overcome obstacles I would otherwise struggle with.

My sergeant first class has taught me discipline, the importance of attention to detail, and the value of persistence. I learned from my staff sergeant that every task, no matter how small, contributes to the larger mission. The civilians have shown me that not everyone in the military is cruel. Their respectful and dignified treatment has left a strong, positive impact on me, especially when I recall my experiences at reception. My team’s patience and commitment to my growth are evident every day.

Like all junior Soldiers, I make mistakes. Instead of belittling me, my leaders are compassionate and understanding. They explain my errors and how to correct them. They encourage me to ask questions and never get mad if I don’t understand something the first time. They joke that *PFC* stands for “Perfect for Cleaning,” yet they ensure I know my role is far more

significant. Their leadership demonstrates that good leaders create good Soldiers.

This exceptional mentorship stands in stark contrast to my husband’s experience in the military. While I have been blessed with leaders who genuinely invest in my growth, he has faced leaders and mentors who failed to provide the guidance and support every Soldier deserves. His challenges have deepened my gratitude for my leadership, reminding me of how transformative good mentorship can be.

Reflecting on my journey, I realized that the rank of private first class means much more than its formal definition. My team showed me that *PFC* stands for something more profound: Prepared for Changes.

Thanks to their guidance, I adapted and grew,

both as a Soldier and as a person. Their mentorship prepared me for any challenge and instilled in me a sense of confidence and resilience I carry with me to this day. Their influence on my journey is a testament to the transformative power of mentorship, inspiring me to believe in every Soldier’s potential for growth and adaptation.

While my experience may differ from others, I believe that corporals, sergeants, and any NCO should treat their Soldiers as my NCOs treat me. One day, I will lead, and I aspire to embody the qualities of my staff sergeant and sergeant first class. I want to prepare my Soldiers for changes just as they did for me. The rank of private first class is not just a stepping stone but a foundation for becoming adaptable, resilient, and ready for any challenge.

In essence, the true meaning of *PFC* is being prepared for changes, and exemplary leadership fosters this readiness. Thanks to the outstanding NCOs who lead me, my journey as a private first class — and now as a specialist — is defined by growth and adaptation.

One of the proudest moments of my career so far was my promotion to specialist. It wasn’t just the promotion but the ceremony — a day I will never forget. Having the command sergeant major and the commanding general of the U.S. Army Combined Arms Center attend is almost unheard of for a specialist’s promotion. Their presence reaffirmed how unique my journey has been and how much my leaders believe in me.



Staff Sgt. Brandon Cox and Sgt. 1st Class Osvaldo Equite shake hands at Equite’s retirement ceremony at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, Aug. 13, 2024. Under their guidance, Spc. Kalisber Ortega learned lessons extending beyond Army protocols. (U.S. Army photo by Spc. Kalisber Ortega)

Reflecting on my journey, I realize that the true value of being a Soldier isn't just about the tasks we perform but the leaders who guide us along the way. I've been fortunate to experience leadership who guided me and helped me grow into a better Soldier and human being.

I hope that all Soldiers, regardless of rank or experience, are afforded the same kind of leadership that I've had the privilege of learning from. Leadership should never be a matter of luck but a constant, intentional effort to guide and develop

those under your charge.

In the Army, we talk a lot about readiness, but true readiness goes beyond just physical preparedness — it's also about mental and emotional strength. And that begins with outstanding leadership. Great leaders empower their Soldiers to reach their full potential.

As I continue to grow in my career, I'll carry the lessons my NCOs instilled in me, always striving to lead others the way I was led — with patience, compassion, and trust in others' growth. ■

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