

Running head: 2ID FIRST SERGEANT

2ID First Sergeant

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Abstract

I was a First Sergeant in the famed Second Infantry Division from April 2002, until July 2003. Security measures were high on all military installations due to the frequent civil unrest in the Republic of Korea. Political tension was rapidly increasing between the United States and the North Korea government. This paper is an examination of the leadership challenges that I experienced in one of the most forwardly deployed units in the world prior to the war on terrorism. I will conclude by enlightening the reader on the specific challenges of maintaining discipline, moral, and unit cohesion during the period leading up to the American forces invasion of Iraq.

Assuming Responsibility

David L. Roman, Command Sergeant Major of the Second Infantry Division DISCOM, called me into his office and asked; “What did you do before coming here to Korea Mustafa?” I replied, “I was the First Sergeant for 59th Quartermaster (POL) at Fort Carson Colorado Sergeant Major”. He then said to me, “what do you want to do now that you are here in the DISCOM”? I told him without hesitation that I wanted to be a First Sergeant. CSM Roman decided to give me a chance to lead soldiers in 2ID, which would pose serious leadership challenges, and said” you need to care for your Soldiers as they are your children and never forget that you are the Father of the company. He then called CSM Herbert McCoy of the 602d ASB and told him that I was in route to Camp Stanley. Command Sergeant Major McCoy assigned me to Headquarters and Supply Company. He said that the previous 1SG had departed earlier than his scheduled date of departure, and that the unit had some challenges based on lack of senior NCO leadership. I went down to the company and I met the Company Commander, he was a young transportation officer who had a great attitude. My first impression was that CPT Anil Chaudry and I would make a great command team. Then I met SFC Eric Dunnam, a Sergeant first Class assigned to the Petroleum Platoon, he was the acting First Sergeant when I arrived to the unit. Dunnam was a highly motivated E-7, an ex-drill sergeant, who was doing an outstanding job trying to keep the company running after his 1SG was reassigned back to the states. I started to formulate my strategy to turning HSC into a high performance team, utilizing the info that I had received from the three most important people to making my transition a smooth one (BN CSM, Company Commander, and acting 1SG).

Establishing Standards

My initial impression of the unit was not very good because of the lack of discipline in the soldiers and the blatant fraternization throughout the organization. I had no knowledge of the leaders within the unit being involved in sexual relations with their subordinates. My assessment of prevalent fraternization was because leaders were frequently drinking and socializing with their troops; in some cases, NCOs were roommates with privates in the barracks. I briefed the Company Commander on my observations, and provided him with my recommended courses of action. Captain Chaudry gave me full authority to establish order and discipline in the unit. He fully supported me in the effort to get the unit going in the right direction. Change was definitely necessary and I became the change agent. My first order of business was to identify all subordinate leaders in my new organization. I called them into my office in groups, starting with the platoon sergeants, and ending with the first line leaders. I asked them what plans they had for career progression, and I stated that I would assist them in their efforts to excel in the military. My approach was very positive, energetic, and standards driven. My intent was to get the platoon sergeants, and junior NCOs to go back to the basics of Army leadership, and enforcing the standards. My first move was to put all SSG and above in their own barracks. The E-5 and below were in another barracks but I separated them by floors. The SGT's were on the third floor, female E-4's and below were on the second floor, the remaining male E-4's and below were on the first floor. I had better command and control by implementing this barrack SOP, but I must admit that the move was somewhat painful for the Soldiers initially. They did not want to move from the comfort of their rooms so they wanted to resist the change. We executed the plan, and everyone moved to his or her newly assigned rooms. Afterwards I organized some social events to raise the morale. I allowed the soldiers to have a party at the barracks, one for

NCOs and another for lower enlisted on a different night. I explained to the NCOs that I expected them to be leaders of their Soldiers not their friends and the party was the first phase of my NCODP program.

Establishing an Organizational Culture

My Platoon Sergeants quickly bought into my leadership philosophy. They were eager to support new innovative ideas, and they provided suggestions, which I readily accepted as long as they were within the commanders' intent. In my unit, Soldiers stood at padre rest when they addressed the leaders. Everyone addressed others by the proper title associated with his or her rank. The commander and I restructured the company training meetings, and emphasized realistic training during Sergeants Time. Our motto was Ride or Die Rough Risers; everyone sounded off with the motto when greeting the company NCOs or Officers. These few small changes instilled pride in the Soldiers, and HSC 602d started to gain positive recognition. The platoon sergeants and I established study groups for Soldiers who wanted to go before promotion boards. I conducted weekly NCODP with all NCOs and I frequently had special sessions with the platoon sergeants. All this changes collective served to create a unique and positive culture in our organization. We held events called NCO Mixers were after several weeks of mission support and training, we would have a social event were the NCOs would dress up and have fun. I made it fun and prestigious to be a noncommissioned officer. We realized that Soldiers started to recognized that the NCOs were in a special group, and then we had lower enlisted inquiring about becoming NCOs. The officers gain a greater sense of respect for my NCOs because they conducted themselves professionally. The HSC culture was very strong and easily recognizable for those on the outside looking in.

Specific Leadership Challenges

My unit was a CSS company on a male dominated mostly combat arms installation. This point is significant because it attributed to additional leadership challenges. It's challenging enough to be a first sergeant in a forwardly deployed unit. Add the pressure of having most of the female soldiers on the installation, and it becomes a force protection concern when you have a ratio of six males to one female. My female soldiers were vital members of the team, many were in the 3/5 platoon driving 10 ton vehicles. In our unit, a few Soldiers got pregnant, and others complained of sexual harassment by males from other units. The commander and I had to do a thorough risk assessment. We then initiated systems to mitigate the risk of losing the female soldiers. Based on a program started by the Division CSM, Command Sergeant Major Lucero, I established weekly leadership patrols through the local party districts outside of our camp. On payday weekends, I had the platoon sergeants join me on what I would call leadership patrols in the vile. We would go out, in BDU'S, and check the clubs to ensure that our soldiers were being safe. On other weekends, it would be SSG and above joining me. At least once a month I would have all NCOs in my company join me in going out checking on soldiers. This system allowed the leaders to see their soldiers when they were intoxicated, and to clearly see some of the hazards that were associated with hanging out and partying over the weekend. It also distinguished NCO's from soldiers and minimized fraternization. We policed our soldiers up, and ensured that they got safely back to the barracks, and on Monday, those who appeared to be at risk would have to talk to the 1SG about doing a personal risk assessment before I would allow them to go out the next weekend. In most cases, they were not in any real trouble so they took it as good advice from a leader who cared. The alcohol consumption was a serious problem that posed a significant leadership challenge. My intent was to eliminate or drastically reduce the

alcohol related incidents. Our unit twice received the 2ID streamer for six consecutive months with no alcohol related incidences.

Another leadership challenge was to eliminate or reduce the number of vehicle accidents that we had, primarily with our pol platoon. These soldiers frequently operated large tank vehicles on some of the most dangerous roads in the Republic of Korea. I requested permission to have a 48 hour safety stand down for our 3/5 platoon, after they had a period of substantial increases in accidents. We put together a system where all NCOs had to be licensed on the piece of equipment that was within their responsibility. Anytime a vehicle was being operated, the commander required both the driver, and TC/VC to have a license for the equipment being operated. We examined our program and found that the most junior and experienced drivers in our organization were behind the wheel of the largest vehicles in our fleet. To mitigate these facts we had platoon sergeant, or platoon leader determine who went out on missions; NCOs trained Soldiers and did rock drills to standard. The commander looked at and signed all dispatches, and inspected rock drills prior to execution. One of the most significant leadership challenges was to maintain morale and discipline after the decision to involuntarily extend a large number of soldiers due to the start of operation Iraqi freedom. The rumors that there was a possibility that some soldiers would get extended started in late February 2003. By March, the war in Iraq had begun and the battalion commander announced that he chose to extend Soldiers with certain critical MOS's for ninety days. The unit sustained a blow to morale because the reality of staying away from loved ones for an additional three months was hard to bear. The S-1 published the involuntary extension list in March 2003; the list included all of my platoon sergeants, and me. Several other Soldiers in the unit were extended and it was a challenge to bring their spirits up. I had to first get over my own disappointment of not leaving in thirty days

as I had anticipated and then I called all of my platoon sergeant to a meeting at the camp snack bar. I looked them in the eye and said how many of you guys are disappointed by the news of getting extended; all four of the Platoon Sergeants raised their hands. I explained that like them I am also mad as hell. I was looking forward to going home next month just as all of you were. I then said how many of you can change the decision that has been made; they all said none of them could. I then said men it's Friday night, we have forty-eight hours to call home, and inform our families and shed our tears; come Monday morning we must be ready to lead our soldiers and none of us will discuss our personal disappointments from this day forward. I inform those senior NCOs of my unit that the country was at war and that across the border approximate 30 miles away we faced an enemy of 1 million North Korea Soldiers. Our fellow soldiers serving in Afghanistan and Iraq were facing a more difficult mission and it was our part in the war on terrorism to stay in place until we could be replaced.

Conclusion

I have served as a First Sergeant for six years consecutively from June 2000 until June 2006. During this time, I have served in four different organizations as the Top Sergeant in the unit. First Sergeant Duty in the Republic of Korea from April 2002 to July 2003 was the most challenging, but also most rewarding assignment I have had in my 22 years of service. I assumed responsibility for an organization that was not meeting the required standards. The Noncommissioned officers in that unit lacked discipline and professionalism. The company commander and I developed a bond, which still exists until today. The command team concept is what enabled us to lead our unit to receive two consecutive streamers for no alcohol related incidents in a six-month period; One DISCOM NCO of the year; Two DISCOM NCOs of the quarter; one DISCOM Soldier of the QTR; One Audie Murphy club inductee and numerous

other accolades over a fifteen month period. No one person can claim to make the unit successful because without teamwork and the support from fellow soldiers the unit will fail. The period discussed had moments of high anxiety, and times of great tension, most of the unit was involuntarily extended for ninety days; however we overcame the leadership challenges and accomplished all missions. I was the unit First Sergeant, and it was my job to care about the soldiers of HSC 602 Aviation Support Battalion as though they were my own children and that is exactly what I did, Hooah!