NCO Leadership, Lesson Learned:

The respect of your Soldiers is earned

As a newly promoted Corporal in Fort Bragg’s Corp Artillery formation, it is saying the least to say that the power had gone to my head. In a place and time where NCO’s were untouchable and Soldiers were ground into the dirt, I was now among the Gods. I had a keen eye and a talent for finding a deficiency on any uniform even in just passing. Within a moment of making an on the spot correction, I could interpret the Soldier’s attitude as disrespecting a Non-Commissioned Officer and put them in the front leaning rest. As a result, the Soldiers of my Unit learned to steer clear of my path. My NCO peers loved it and encouraged my behavior. I was even selected to assist with pre-Air Assault training for my Unit and let loose on trainees in zero-day of our mock Air Assault course. The other NCO’s would “feed” Soldiers to me as if I was a rabid dog off the leash, screaming and smoking everyone in my way.

A few months later while conducting Airborne operations on Sicily dropzone, I turned in my chute and head to the parking lot to eat lunch with my spouse who was waiting on me. We could see the Soldiers sitting in the LMTV waiting for our chalk to be all accounted for, so I took my time and enjoyed my food. A moment later, the 1SG appeared and looked upset. I watched through the car windshield as he spoke to them and started barking instructions. I told my spouse that I should go, but before I could even get out of the car they had closed the tailgate and looked like they were ready to roll. Half-way back to the Battery my phone erupted with voicemails and text messages. Apparently, I had been out of service for my phone and just got service again. The messages sounded pissed and that they were looking for me. They thought that I left the dropzone and was unaccounted for (a punishable offense). When I returned to the Unit area, the First Sergeant screamed from across the parking lot for me to get my rear end in his office along with my platoon sergeant and squad leader. I stood frozen at parade rest as he furiously screamed at me for conduct unbecoming of an NCO. When given a chance to speak, my excuse didn’t sway him in the slightest. They laterally demoted me back to Specialist and sent me to close of business formation with no rank on my uniform.

The next duty day I was in the motorpool doing preventative maintenance as was normal for a Specialist and none of my peers would assist me with basic checks like checking the brake lights. I had lost their respect and they wouldn’t even speak to me unless they needed to for the job. For the next seven months, it felt like I was in exile. I earned the rank of Sergeant on a momentous day and was pinned by the same First Sergeant who had demoted me several months earlier. I stood humbled before the formation that I had disrespected, the formation that had excommunicated me, and told them that this was a great honor and that I would do everything in my power to earn and maintain their trust. Every Soldier and NCO that I have led since has heard this story, and I have made sure to earn their trust as well. Our Soldiers, peers and leaders must respect us as people, not just as a rank and it is on us to have the integrity to look people in the eye and treat them with dignity and respect.

Be Bold! Air Assault! – SFC L