

LETTING GO OF THE REINS

Situation: My unit was not unlike most others in the battalion. We worked hard when it was time to work, and we played hard when the time was offered. Our camaraderie was good, morale was stable, and we were getting back into the swing of everyday life back in garrison. Garrison life though has as many, if not more, challenges than deployed life. Never too far from the commander's mind are the ever-present family issues, pay issues, discipline issues, health issues, and good order and discipline issues. I was not so lucky to be free from having to deal with some of these issues as a company commander. But I was up to the challenge and faced each of them with as much wisdom and professionalism that I had, and where I lacked experience I sought guidance from the guys I trusted, the commander, the XO, and the senior officers of the battalion.

It all started when I overheard a section sergeant talking about one of my Soldiers, SPC Albright, who was thinking about proposing marriage to Janice, a woman with a very bad reputation. Janice was a woman whom a generous portion of the company had previous intimate relations, she was a woman who did not shy away from attention or sexual offers. I was concerned about SPC Albright's relationship with her because experience told me this type of woman is not necessarily intent on marrying the Soldier because she loves him but because she wants something from him. I counseled the Soldier about the woman's past behavior and her reputation among the Soldiers. I cautioned him if he became engaged to her there would be a lot of jealousy, tension, and distrust between them, mainly coming from him towards her. I cautioned SPC Albright this woman's behavior has not given him any indication that she is in love with him but her actions seem to lean towards getting easy access to the military benefits – namely the commissary, the hospital; but I did not leave out that she did thrive on the abundance of Soldier attention.

Thankfully, SPC Albright took my advice and decided not to get engaged to this woman. As a matter of fact, he even stopped seeing her after he recognized what I had been describing as true. Things were looking up for him. And none too soon, I was glad he had made the right decision about his relationship with Janice because in just three short months I would be changing command and would not be able to “keep tabs” on him anymore.

As it normally does near the end of command, time flew by. I rarely saw SPC Albright due to my busy schedule with change of command inventories, property book consolidation, evaluation reports to write, and final touches on all the projects I had to complete before my departure. I was sure he was on the right path to making good choices but I wanted to make sure the in-coming commander, CPT Smerthen, had a heads up about SPC Albright's situation. I laid out the entire situation about this woman and her reputation and how she had been dating SPC Albright. I told CPT Smerthen how I diverted a lot of unit stress by advising the young specialist not to get involved with this woman and about the stresses that could arise if he decided to marry her. CPT Smerthen seemed to understand the significance of the averted situation. I felt I had done what I could to help the unit, the commander, and the Soldier to the best of my abilities. I was able to change command with a clear conscience that I had done my duty.

After I changed command I had a few weeks of free time on my hands and thought I'd stop into the “ole stomping grounds” to check on my buddies. My buddy CPT Johnson, a company commander in the same battalion, pulled me into his office and told me what he had heard about my former unit. He told me that SPC Albright had gotten back into his relationship with Janice and they were going out to the clubs like never before. A few of his Soldiers told him they had seen SPC Albright and Janice get into numerous arguments which had “come to blows” in the parking lots of the clubs. CPT Johnson kept an ear open to more incidents but no additional news had surfaced until a month ago when he heard that SPC Albright and Janice had gotten married. CPT Johnson said he talked to CPT Smerthen about SPC Albright and Janice's situation and asked if he had noted any problems. CPT Smerthen told CPT Johnson that it was his command and CPT Johnson needs to stay in his lane. I was very surprised to hear of the change of events and was conflicted about what to do.

The next day as I was going through the Post Exchange, when one of my former section sergeants, SSG Grimes, came up to me with a glum look on his face. I asked him how things were going and he explained things were not going well. He was concerned about SPC Albright. He had been hearing some pretty bad things about SPC Albright and Janice's marriage; it seemed as though its path along a very rocky road was getting rockier. SSG Grimes explained SPC Albright had come to work with a few scratches on his face last week but waved off any assistance to the matter. He said he stopped by the Albright's quarters the other day during duty hours but Janice didn't answer the door. He asked, “Sir, can't you do something?” As much as I loved these guys and was completely devoted to their well-being I felt it was not my place to step into the situation; I did not have command authority anymore so I did what I thought was the next best thing – I advised him to go to the commander and get the chain of command involved. He said that was going to be his next stop. I asked him to give me a call on the outcome. That evening I had to sit down as I listened to SSG Grimes explain how his meeting with the commander went. SSG Grimes said he explained all he had known about SPC Albright's situation. He asked the commander if he was aware of the past history. CPT Smerthen said he had been briefed by the out-going commander but frankly didn't have time to dedicate his attention to one Soldier's personal problems. SSG Grimes was at wits end because CPT Smerthen didn't really seem to put much stock in the matter. SSG Grimes told me CPT Smerthen resisted the request that the command step in and check it out and insisted that SPC Albright was an adult who could handle his own private problems. CPT Smerthen said every marriage has its problems and it was not his place to meddle in SPC Albright's private matters. What should I have done?

REFLECTION...

I decided to try to talk to CPT Smerthen one more time. I called him and explained what I had heard and asked him to look into the situation. He was a bit offended that I knew as much – if not more about the situation in his company – than he did. This did not put a good spin on what I was asking him to do, as it turned out he ended up being very curt on the phone with me and in a last huff told me to mind my own business. I was surprised that someone could be so proud as to not listen to a former commander who knew the Soldiers and their situations. I decided to let him command his company. Horror struck my ears two months later when I got the news that SPC Albright had committed suicide after killing his wife and her child. As I reflect on what could have possibly gone wrong I can only surmise the in-coming commander did not understand the dynamics of the unit and its personalities. I can only guess that because he was new to the unit and very busy “learning the ropes” he did not have the time to devote individual attention to a situation he thought was already squared away. As it goes, I briefed him SPC Albright was on the right path again; how could the new commander have known that SPC Albright broke down and began dating the woman again and then marry her. Whose “fault” is it that the marriage occurred? Is there any fault to be had by anyone besides SPC Albright and the woman?

Ethical Dilemma at the Time of the Incident: The dilemma I faced was to whether or not to get involved and reiterate the severity of the situation to the new commander or the chain of command.

Conflict or Tension of the 7 Army Values? How Did You Resolve Those Conflicts? The 7 Army Values that I believe were prevalent in my decisions as commander and as the out-going commander are Loyalty and Personal Courage.

Loyalty to my profession, to my unit, and my Soldiers; I was the commander and had ultimate responsibility for what happened in my unit. I did not take this responsibility lightly. I had to ensure good order and discipline in my unit and this woman was in no way adding to the good order and discipline of my unit. I had to do what I could to keep my Soldier on the right track and out of harm's way.

Personal Courage for a commander is a must. There are simply too many opportunities to be pushed aside if a commander does not have personal courage to stand up and face adversity head on. The adversity in this situation was not a difficult one – what would my Soldier think of me involving myself in his personal life decisions. I think I handled the situation professionally and my Soldier accepted my advice because I showed him that I was truly concerned for his well-being and his future.

How Did You Get the Courage To Do the Harder Right? I got the courage to act – while I was commander from the fact that I was the commander. I was in charge of all that occurred or did not occur in my company. As the “outsider” (commander who had changed command) looking in, I had to accept that I was not in charge anymore and that the new commander would care as much as I had for all that occurred or did not occur in his company. Each time I think about SPC Albright and my command experience I have to remind myself about the actions I took – the counseling and mentoring, the checking up on, and the advising –leading up to the change of command. I had done what I could to help the unit, the commander and the Soldier.