

"Walking Back to the Barracks"

by; Charlie Bissett

The sun seemed to sit high above the horizon as I left the dining facility and walked back to my barracks. It was spring time and the days were getting longer. For me the day was already long enough, and it was not over with yet. In the few private moments I had while I strolled down the side walk, I reflected on what had happened that day, and about my decision to go back into the Army. There were some doubts in my mind about coming back in. Was this the right choice?

After leaving the enlistment center in Los Angeles on Wednesday, I had flown to a training center in the Midwest. I arrived at the in-processing center on Thursday. Today, Friday was my second full day back in the Army after an almost two-year break in service to attend college.

Just coming out of civilian life, I was placed temporarily in a platoon filled with mostly first-time recruits. To guide this platoon through in-processing were two senior drill sergeants and a corporal. For the next week I received my comprehensive in-processing with this platoon of 114 new recruits.

As a sergeant, I had a two-man room which I shared with an ex-Marine corporal. The rest of the recruits slept in open bays that held about forty people each. During our stay at the in-processing center we were restricted to the area. Well, they were restricted to the area. I doubt anyone would have said anything to me if I wandered off alone.

Yesterday had been spent being herded around like cattle, filling out papers, being looked over by doctors, and the like. By the end of that day, I was tired and knew my body was still trying to adjust to the three-hour time difference between California and the Midwest.

Today, First-call had been at 5:00 a.m. By 5:30 a.m. We were supposed to have been standing in formation outside, ready to march to breakfast.

At 5:20 a.m. the first of the two drill sergeants arrived in the barracks. The drill sergeant took me into the bay next to my room, and with the whole bay standing at attention, he yelled at me because the place was still a mess. He then took me through each of the other bays pointing faults out to me, threatening to punish me if I let this

happen again.

By 5:40 a.m. the platoon was finally formed up in front of our barracks, ten minutes late. Now, the second of the two drill sergeants spent two minutes chewing me out because the platoon was too slow.

I did not feel guilty or responsible about the platoon's shortfall. Neither of these two drill sergeants had instructed the platoon of what was expected of them. Nor had they told me of any responsibility or authority I was authorized to exercise over the platoon. Well, that might be a fine technical point, but if I was going to avoid more clashes with the drill sergeants, I would have to gain control over this platoon. With over a 114 people, there were enough people to form an infantry company. The answer therefore was to set up an inside organization, just like a real company. Although I was not sure exactly how I was going to do it, I started to work on a plan. Within the platoon there were several people besides myself, who were prior-service. From this talent I had to select my deputies.

At breakfast, I told CPL Randy Elderidge, the ex-Marine, that I wanted him to get together with CPL Eliot, who was in-processing us and find out what our duties were, the time schedule we had to know, and the standards for barracks cleaning.

After breakfast I found five of the prior-service reservists and made them squad leaders. These prior-service reservists had taken basic training the year before and were returning for more specialized training in their military vocation. I told the platoon that when we had formations, these guys were to be in the front of the platoon, because they knew how to march.

Once the in-processing center opened, the drill sergeants began taking the platoon from one station to the next. I noticed that aside from moving us around, the drill sergeants did not pay much attention to the troops. If a recruit had a question, the drill sergeants would put him off saying, "You will be told what you need to know later." So, I began moving around among the troops answering their questions.

When we got to the educational benefits section, the platoon was shown a film about education benefits available through the Army. The sergeant supervising the department saw me and took me to his office. He asked me to talk to my platoon about signing up for the college program. To get this benefit, the soldiers had to sign up for it during their first month in the Army.

After the film, the sergeant introduced me to the platoon as someone who knew a lot about the Army, and that they should listen to what I had to say. This gave me a great deal of public credibility with my platoon.

When we got to the dining hall for lunch, the drill sergeants turned the platoon over to me. This dining hall seated 250 people. During the hour and a half that it was open, over 600 troops would eat there. I moved the platoon up to the dining hall, and marched then through the serving line.

I was able to get permission for the recruits to go to the little store to buy toiletries, and permission to use the telephones during our breaks. I kept firm control over these special activities by sending the recruits out to the store or phones in small groups under the control of one of the prior-service soldiers. Moving in chaperoned groups like this made the new troops feel secure about moving through new territory. The new troops had apprehensions about getting lost or inadvertently committing some minor act of misconduct that could cause them unwanted attention. The prior-service guys were having a good time exercising the responsibilities I had delegated them. They were showing off to the others what they knew.

I had taken advantage of every opportunity to control the platoon, and to control any privileges they received. I wanted the guys in the platoon to get accustomed to the idea of my being a person in authority over them. I wanted the reputation for being competent and benevolent. By the end of the day I felt I had earned a good deal of trust and loyalty from the soldiers within the platoon.

At dinner that night, the drill sergeants left the platoon off at the dining hall. I moved my troops through the serving line first, then I got my dinner and ate last. It is traditional that a leader insures his men have eaten before he stops to eat. Now, as I was reaching the steps to my barracks, I was grateful for the few minutes of solitude I had. I wanted to just call it a day, and go home at the end of the day like I did as a civilian. But, I was not a civilian any more, I was a sergeant in the Army.

Because I ate last, I got back to the barracks after almost everyone else was already there. When I walked into 2nd Bay one of the young soldiers whose bunk was next to the door, stood up and called, "At Ease!" for me. Everyone stopped what they were doing and stood at the side of their bunks along the center isle at parade-rest.

I turned to one of the older recruits standing near-by and asked him where the drill sergeants were?

He said, "SGT Bissett, they went home."

"Did they say when they would be back?"

"Drill sergeant Rogers said he would see us Tuesday, Sergeant."

"Tuesday?" I said, "What happened to Monday?"

"Monday is a national holiday," the recruit said, "We have a three-day weekend, Sergeant."

"Thank you," I said. But in my mind, I thought, Oh no! If I cannot keep these guys busy, they will go crazy with boredom. I could not believe that those two jerks went home without saying a word to me.

Well, at least with those two drill sergeants gone, they won't be around to interfere with my organizing this platoon. First, I needed to select deputies who could help transform this cluster of bewildered young men into a smooth-running team. I turned my attention to the rest of the bay. "All the reservists with prior service, raise your hands! Squad Leaders, put your hands down!" This left me with two soldiers still holding their hands up.

I pointed to one of them, PVT Steve Cooper, and said, "You, soldier, stand in the center isle! Everyone else, put your hands down and look at him!"

"From now on, this man is your Bay Leader!" I said in a loud voice. "He will be responsible for keeping this bay, the drill sergeant's office, the upper stairwell, the laundry room, and the toilet clean and orderly! At 8:30 p.m. is lights-out! I will inspect this bay at about 7:30 p.m.! I know that some of you prior-service guys out rank him, but you have other responsibilities. Up here in the bay, I want everyone to give him your full support!"

"Next subject, I want everyone to shower and shave tonight! You will not have the time for it in the morning. Your uniform, soft-cap, socks, wallet, and everything you will wear or carry with you tomorrow is to be put in the left tray of your footlocker. This way, you will not waste time hunting for it in the morning. Your footlocker and duffel bag are to be locked at any time your hand is not reaching into them."

"For this inspection, I will inspect your bunk-bed, to ensure that it is made up correctly. Your boots and shoes, or foot-gear as we call them in the Army, are to be laced up and tied, with the shoestrings tucked inside so that they do not show. Then, they will be lined up, on top of your footlocker. Your duffel bag is to be hung from the head board of the top bunk by both shoulder straps over your foot locker."

"Does everyone understand me?"

The room was quiet. I thought to myself that they were nervous, but did not want to give me a negative impression by asking questions. So I asked the question again, "Does

everyone understand me?"

"Yes Sergeant!" the prior-service soldiers sang in chorus.

"You sound weak... real weak!" I chided them. "I've heard little girls with more enthusiasm than you. Now, lets do this right! Everyone, sound off together, and show me you got some balls.... Does everyone understand me?"

"YES SERGEANT!" the bay thundered.

"Now, everyone gather around me here next to this foot locker. There is a lot more to inspections than just seeing if the place is clean," I began to explain. "During an inspection the items that are being inspected everyone is expected to have displayed in the same uniform manner. This way, the inspector can go through the inspection quickly. If there's a problem, the inspector can spot them immediately, because it will appear different from the normal display. Tonight, I have over a hundred of you to inspect, and I want to get this over with quickly. I need to sleep, also."

"By laying out your equipment in the same uniform manner, you learn to pay attention to details. Attention-to-detail is a very important principle in the Army. If you can get the small details correct, then the big picture will come together easily."

"Later, you will have combat vehicles to be kept organized in a uniform manner. This way, if in the night or the middle of combat, you are transferred to another vehicle, you will know where everything is and spot missing items at once. Being lost in a new vehicle is not an emotion you want to experience when the lieutenant is evaluating you during an exercise, or someone is shooting at you during combat."

Next, I explained how I wanted the bunks and footlockers displayed. Then I went to other two bays, assigned a bay leader, and outlined my inspection program. It was a simple first inspection, I thought. I would come back in an hour, inspect, and have some free time before lights-out. Boy, was I wrong... as I would learn by the end of the night.

After my visit to each of the bays, I returned to my room. My throat was becoming sore from all the shouting and lecturing. My tonsils and larynx hadn't had a workout like this in a long time. I had kept myself more than busy all day long, and my feet were crying for rest. I was honestly afraid that I would make a mistake at this time. Being fatigued could cause me to lose my sense of commitment to what I was doing. As it was, I was already angry at those two drill sergeants. During dinner the prior-service leader of the platoon next door had told me that his drill sergeants were actively supporting him. I felt like I was out on a branch alone, baby-sitting a madhouse.

CPL Elderidge was just getting out of the shower as I walked over to my bunk and plopped down on it. "Hi, Corporal. Are you about finished in there?" I asked as I began unlacing my boots. Our room had a private latrine with toilet, sink and shower.

"Hi, Sergeant." he said through the open door. "Do you need to get in here right away?"

"Oh, no," I answered, "Go ahead and finish what you're doing. Just, when you're finished, if I fall asleep wake me up. I have to inspect the barracks in an hour."

When Randy finished in the shower, he walked over and sat across from me on his bunk. "So, Charlie, what's this about an inspection?" he asked.

Up to now I had not told CPL Elderidge what I was planning to do. I was making it up impromptu as I went along, starting with the little things and building on my successes. I felt it was time to tell him what I wanted his role was to be. "Well Randy, after what happened this morning, I decided to start holding nightly inspections so that everything will be ready in the morning." I began.

"That might be a good idea." he interjected, "By the way, CPL Eliot said we have to post barracks guards at night, three per hour."

"Great, you remembered to talk to the corporal." I had completely forgotten that I had asked CPL Elderidge to talk to CPL Eliot. "Did you find out about the rest of the questions I asked you?"

"Yeah, but he didn't tell me anything we don't now know about, except about the guards." he said.

Just then, there was a knock at the door. "Enter!" I said.

One of the recruits came into my room. I asked. "What do you need?"

"Sergeant," he began. "Can I use the telephone?" Not another petty interruption, I thought to myself. To these recruits every little problem was a major issue.

"Which bay are you in?"

"The down stairs one, Sergeant."

"Did you ask your bay leader, before coming up here?" I had told the squad leaders and bay leaders to try solving these little problems before sending them to me. That way, I

could deal with the larger issues that affected the whole platoon.

"No, Sergeant."

"Does he know that you're up here?"

"No, Sergeant."

"Then, I think that in the future, you should see him first, No one is to use the telephones before the inspection. Dismissed!" I was becoming irritated by this interruption. It seemed that I could not do anything without someone bothering me with questions that common sense could answer, but knew it would be better not to get upset just yet, and ignore his ignorance. I did not have any more time for his non-problem.

After the recruit left, I turned my attention back to CPL Elderidge. I was trying to work up to persuading him to help me with my plan to put some order in this platoon. I began again by saying, "I would like you to go through each of the bays and make sure they are getting ready for the inspection. I put PFC Turner in charge of 3rd Bay, but he has no prior-service experience. Help him out, please."

"Randy, we have over a hundred people in this platoon. I think the best way to keep this group organized is to set it up just like a real company. Therefore, that makes you the number two man in this place. I want you to be like the first sergeant around here."

"Most of these guys are going to basic training. We need to try making it easier for them if we can, by preparing them in advance, before the drill sergeants at basic get hold of them. Just in the area of hygiene alone we are already having problems. I've noticed that some of the guys don't flush the toilet after themselves, and there are always others that take a bath only once a week, weather they need it or not. We have a three-day weekend. Let's use this time to help these guys get ready for basic."

"Well sure Charlie," Randy began, "But, I'm an ex-Marine. I don't know anything about Army basic training."

"Randy, don't worry. Maybe the traditions are different, but Army or Marine, there are certain principles to discipline and good soldiering that are common to both. Back me up, keep the routine details out of my way and we will make this platoon swing." I answered as I started for the shower.

"Okay, I can do that." he said. "Let me get the guard roster set up."

Just then there was a knock at the door. This had better be important, I thought to myself. I don't think anyone could understand how badly my nerves needed a nice warm shower. In fact, my sanity demanded it. If it wasn't important I was going to lose my temper. "Come in!" I calmly said.

PVT Windgate entered the room to find me standing in only a towel with a bar of soap in one hand and fresh underclothes in the other. "What do you want, Private?" I asked.

"Sergeant, I feel sick...."

No... God, no, I cried to myself. This could all turn into nothing, or it could be the beginning of a crisis. "Tell me," I asked calmly. "What's wrong?"

"I've got a really bad headache and upset stomach, Sergeant."

"Corporal," I said, "Get Wayne Tenaka in 2nd Bay. Tell him we have a medical problem.... Hurry!" In a flash, Randy was out the door to get the medical tech. I offered PVT Windgate a seat.

It was only a few moments later when CPL Elderidge returned with PVT Tenaka. Wayne and I had gotten to know each other earlier. "Wayne, have a look at this guy. He's not feeling well."

Then I turned to PVT Windgate and crouched down in front of where he sat. "Windgate, why don't you go with PVT Tenaka into the drill sergeant's office. It's private in there, and you can talk. He's a state licensed medical technician. If he can't help you, I'll have the Staff Duty NCO take you to the clinic."

"Wayne," I continued, "I am going to take a quick shower. If for any reason you think he might be better off going to the clinic, let me know. I just want you to take a look and tell me what you think."

Quickly, I jumped into the shower. I was in such a rush, I didn't bother to use the soap. If a decision was needed, I had to be there.

When I got out of the shower, Randy was knocking on the door. "Hey, Sergeant!" he called through the closed door, "Take your time. Tenaka said Windgate's okay."

"That may be so," I called back, "But, I want to talk to Tenaka when I'm finished in here."

After drying off, I stepped back into the room to find CPL Elderidge on his bed alone in the room. "Where's Tenaka?" I wondered out loud.

He's still talking to PVT Windgate." the corporal answered. He held up the clipboard and added, "Here's the guard roster for tonight."

Once having looked it over, I said, "I want you to get these guys together, Read the General Orders to them and have them recite the orders back to you. Tell them to read their Special Orders before they go to bed. That way if there are any questions, they can get them answered before lights-out. But, don't trust them to read the Special Orders on their own. If there are any problems tonight, they must wake me up first! And, I want the last shift to wake me at 4:38 a.m. In fact, have the last set of guards see me. I'll tell them myself."

"Is there anything else?" asked the corporal.

"No.... Just, thanks a lot, Corporal." I answered.

I was about half dressed when PVT Tenaka came into my room. He was older than most of the recruits, maybe mid-twenties. Even though he had no military experience, he had the maturity, strength, and compassion that made me glad to have him around. "Come in Wayne, have a seat.... How is Windgate?"

"Oh, he'll be okay." said Tenaka as he sat down. "There's nothing physically wrong with him. He's just under a lot of stress. So, I sat and talked with him for a while."

"Is he going to be able to hang in there?" I asked. "Stress is not a small issue in this program."

Well you've got to understand, he's only eighteen and just got married last month." began Wayne. "And, this is the first time he's been away from his family and friends. Charlie, he is really scared and homesick. Yet, he wants to make it through basic training really bad.... That's why he didn't want to go on sick call. As it was, he was really afraid to tell you that he was feeling sick. He's scared of leaving you with a negative impression."

My Lord." I sighed. "That poor kid must be going through hell. Wayne, where's he at? Maybe I can give him some encouragement.

When PVT Tenaka and I found PVT Windgate, he was sitting on his bunk with his new friends, quietly trying to get ready for the inspection. I squatted down by where he sat and said, "Hi, soldier. How are you feeling?"

"Oh, I'm okay. "he said quietly.

"Listen to me for a second," I began. "I know it seems kind of rough right now. But, you

can't take yourself too seriously right now or your emotions will eat you up. Take it one moment at a time, stick by your buddies and you will come sailing out of this like it was nothing. And, you will be better for the experience. Okay?"

"Sure, Sergeant." he answered.

I held out my hand and offered the young man two aspirin tablets. "Now, if you got any problems, you see your bay leader, see Tenaka, and if that doesn't work find me." As I stood, I added, "We are here to support each other, and pull each other through. So, don't worry."

As I walked away from PVT Windgate, I could not help feeling guilty. Only a few hours earlier I was only thinking about my problems. My problems were nothing compared to guys like Windgate. They were looking to me for help and a little direction, and I was wasting time feeling sorry for myself. There was no excuse for such self-indulgence. I was an older, more experienced soldier. It was time I followed my own advice, and corrected my attitude.

At 7:10 p.m. I stepped into 3rd Bay.

The first recruit to see me, got all big eyed, jumped up and said in a soft voice, "You guys, at-ease, it's the Sergeant!"

Some of the recruits standing nearby jumped up to stand by their bunks. But, most of the others in the bay did not hear him and continued with what they were doing. The poor guy meant well, but he still didn't know the correct protocol for when a sergeant walks into a room. I did not want to lose my military bearing, or unnecessarily humiliate this young recruit, but I thought this was really funny and had to suppress my laughter.

I walked over to the soldier that had first spoken. "I don't think your buddies at the other end of the bay heard you." I said in a gentle voice, "You need to sound off again so that the whole bay can hear you. Go ahead, sound off."

"At-Ease!" he shouted.

Everyone stood by their bunks as I walked up the center isle of the bay. By the time I reached the center of the bay CPL Elderidge was standing by my side. "Bay Leader, stand in the center isle!" I ordered.

PFC Turner stepped into the center isle at the end of the bay near his bunk. "Is this bay prepared for inspection?" I said in a voice that could be heard by the whole bay.

"No, Sergeant. It is not ready." he answered.

"I said I would inspect at 7:00 p.m. It is now 7:11 p.m., and you are not ready." I said to the whole bay. "You owe me ten push-ups. Front-leaning-rest-position, MOVE!"

In unison they sang their cadence for me. Ten push-ups were not a lot of repetitions. Before they finished basic training, they would be easily doing 40 to 60 push-ups at a time. I just wanted them to know that I was going to get serious, if they did not start to take me seriously.

It was the same story in the other two bays. They were not ready, so they sang cadence for me in the front-leaning-rest. By 7:30 p.m. I was ready to try again.

The second time around, they were still not ready. So, they sang cadence again. I next called each of the Bay Leaders aside and warned them that if the platoon was not ready the next time, I would hold a formation on the parade field, and I would teach Army calisthenics for an hour.

The third time. Once again, I began with 3rd Bay. "PFC Turner," I bellowed through the bay, "Is this bay ready for inspection?"

"Yes, Sergeant." he answered.

"Follow me through the inspection." I told the Bay Leader.

At the second bunk I found a fault. One of the two recruits had his shoes and boots out of sequence. I looked at Turner and said, "You owe me five push-ups for this."

At the third bunk I found a duffel bag without a lock. Turner did five more push-ups.

Before I had gotten half way down the left side of the isle, Turner had done 45 push-ups. They were not ready. so, I had to stop. Why should I kill Jack Turner with push-ups when it was obvious that this bay had a massive attitude problem. "This is bullshit!" I bellowed to the bay. "Do all of you think you can blow me off, and I not notice it? Two hours ago, I told you that I was going to have an inspection. This should have been a simple inspection to see if you were all ready for tomorrow. All you had to do was make your bed and put your shoes out on display."

"If you would have cooperated with me the first time, you would have had an hour and a half of free time before lights-out. So, you don't want to work together, and instead of saving some time for yourself by this stupid little short cut, you have hurt yourself. This is

YOUR TIME that you have lost. You have shot yourself in the foot, and stabbed you buddies in the back."

"Is that what you think the Army is about? Forget your buddy, you'll take care of yourself first? What do you think's going to happen when you end up on the battlefield and your buddies learn they can't trust you? Do you think that if the situation gets desperate, they are going to risk themselves to get you to safety?"

"If you don't learn team work, you are going to suffer for it" No one is fooled. And, if you are not ready when I return, you will suffer for it tonight!"

I was getting nervous now. Although what I was trying to do was more for their benefit than for mine, my own self esteem was involved. Things were not going right. It's always dangerous when a leader threatens a group. If the group tries to test the leader, and the leader can't uphold the threat, the leader will lose control over the group. I was in a real tight spot now.

As I walked into the next bay everyone came to parade rest. Together with the Bay Leader we passed down the isle inspecting each display. Not good, but it was their first inspection, so I let it pass.

With each fault I found the, Bay leader did five push-ups. At the discovery of the fourth fault, I directed the Bay Leader to give me five more push-ups. Just then one of the privates shouted at me from across the bay, "Sergeant, that's not right!"

"What?" I said in surprise....

"You can't punish one man for someone else's mistake...it's not right." Across the bay I saw it was one of my prior-service squad leaders, PVT Joseph Vasquez. "In my ROTC leadership class our books say that if you punish anyone for someone else's mistake you have to punish the whole group."

Oh no... I thought to myself, I've got an officer cadet in the group. He was a member of the Reserve Officers Training Corps. He's read enough college textbooks to know how to put his foot in his mouth, but doesn't have any practical experience, yet. He meant well, but he needed to learn the limits of book knowledge.

"At ease!" I started to say....

"But, Sergeant, you can't"

"At-Ease, soldier! Now listen to me." I started to say again, "When I asked if the bay

was ready for inspection, and he said it was not, then it was everyone's fault. But, when he said it was ready for inspection, he assumed responsibility upon his own shoulders for this bay. I have my choice of whether all of you will be punished for not being ready, or him for not pre-inspecting you before turning the bay over to me for my inspection."

I had to respect the fact that PVT Vasquez was willing to risk my anger to protest what he saw as an immoral act, even when the point he was making would have involved his sharing the punishment with his comrade. He had moral courage, and with a little maturity and experience, he would make a good officer.

After finishing 2nd Bay, I went to 1st Bay. There SPC Edward Reynolds was waiting in the center of the bay with everyone standing by their bunks. When I entered the door with CPL Elderidge, SPC Reynolds called, "Bay.... Attention!" and saluted me.

Returning his salute, I was impressed that Ed was demonstrating the correct Army protocol. It is customary for the senior person to salute the inspector during a formal inspection, regardless of rank.

"Is this bay ready for inspection, Specialist?" I asked.

"Yes, Sergeant." he answered.

"Please, follow me as we walk through."

About eleven bunks down I found a duffel bag hanging from the bunk by only one strap. I held up the unsecured strap and looked at the recruit to whom it belonged. "Young man, is this strap broken?" I asked.

"No, Sergeant." he answered.

"Is there some special reason why your duffel bag is not hung from the bunk by both straps, like everyone else's?"

"No, there is none, Sergeant."

"Humm... Simply, just didn't follow directions." I mused out loud. I turned back to the last soldier I had inspected and asked him, "Do you want to go into combat with a person that can't follow the simplest of directions?"

"No, Sergeant!" answered the tenth soldier.

I turned around and faced the soldier that had been on the opposite side of the isle, "Do you want the have a soldier on your team that screws up, and lets everyone down?" I asked.

"No, Sergeant!" answered the next soldier.

I turned to the eleventh soldier and grabbed the hanging strap, "Well, that's a shame." I said as I let go of the strap. Because of your inability to pay attention to what is going on around you, your bay leader has to do push-ups."

I moved to a position where I could look straight into the eyes of this young recruit, and said to the Bay Leader, "You owe me five push-ups, Specialist. Front-leaning-rest position, move!"

The recruit stood motionless, except for the quivering of his mouth that betrayed his anguish as his Bay Leader did pushups.

Moving down the line toward the end of the bay, I was beginning to think this bay had its act together, though it was not perfect. Some of these guys really needed a class in how to make their bunks and fold a blanket. Maybe their mothers always made their beds for them. But, I was not their mother, and they were going to have to take care of themselves. The bed making class would come in the morning. Tonight, it was learning about inspections.

As I neared the end of the line my eye caught a discrepancy. I stopped in front of the recruit. "Did you think that after all my years of military service you could fool me with a trick like this? I'm only a junior sergeant, but do you realize what would happen to you and your squad leader if you tried to pull this trick on a drill sergeant?" He was not sure what I was talking about, yet.

"No, No, No..." I chided him. "I don't want to hear any of any weak excuses. You'll only make me angry. You're not paying attention to details."

I pulled a pen out of my pocket, reached down and stuck it behind the top set of boot laces. Pulling the laces out revealed that they were not tied before being tucked inside. "Well, look at this. If I remember correctly, I said I wanted laces tied." I held up the boots by the untied laces. "Everyone else seems to have heard me. But, you must think I'm too dumb to notice. After ten years of being in the Army, you think you can be lazy, and a sergeant won't notice. And you know what's really sad? It looks like the Specialist worked pretty hard to get this bay ready for this inspection." I said as I placed the boots

in the young man's arms. Looking deep into the recruit's eyes, I continued, "Now, because of your laziness he will have to pay the price...."

"Specialist, five pushups."

As SPC Reynolds started counting push-ups, I asked the recruit, "Do you think it is right that you should cause someone else to suffer, because you can't follow instructions?"

The whole bay was dead quiet. The recruit stood stiff with a set of boots in his arms. His eyes started to fill with water in one corner, and a tear began to form. "No, Sergeant, it is not," he answered.

I was using these inspections to accomplish several objectives. I needed to get the attention of those people who had problems adapting. By failing this little inspection, I had some idea of who these people were. When they failed, and someone else had to pay the price, all I had to do was make them face their feelings of guilt. When the rest of the group saw people whom they looked up to and depended upon suffer, morale outrage would be the result. If I did this right, all these individuals would come together as a group, and I would have everyone's complete attention. I would not have to yell at anyone, or resort to excessive vulgarity. My ultimate objective was to break them out of the individualism that is so much a part of their civilian upbringing, and get them used to submitting to their unit. Such integration would be a life or death issue on a battlefield.

Now, I needed to counteract anyone who might try to undo my work. They needed to be convinced that I was not the bad guy, that I was just doing my job. I did not want to see what happened upstairs happen again, and find myself on the defensive. So, I decided to use SPC Reynolds to help me.

When I reached the end of the line, I quickly walked to the center of the bay leaving the specialist and corporal standing at the end of the bay. "Now, some of you some questions about how I conduct inspections. So, let me set the record straight."

"SPC Reynolds, what is your military occupation?"

"I am a military police officer," he answered.

"How many years experience do you have as an M.P.?"

"Three years, Sergeant."

"In your experience, Specialist, have I done anything that violates military law or

exceeds my authority as a noncommissioned officer?"

"No, Sergeant. Everything you have done has been correct."

"Lights-out in ten minutes! Carry-on!" I ordered the bay. "Specialist, please follow me."

Together, Ed Reynolds, Randy and I stepped into the hallway outside the bay. "I'm sorry Ed about putting you down for push-ups. I'm trying to get these recruits ready for basic." I said. "Hopefully, I got their attention."

Just then the noise from inside the bay reached our ears through the half open door. Some recruit with an authoritative voice was yelling at the rest of the bay, "Don't nobody ever screw up again on no inspection, or I'll kick your ass. Especially you two!" Behind that voice came a chorus of other voices chiding the two offenders for their delinquencies.

When I turned back to Ed, I could see fire in the eyes of what was before an easy-going person, "Damn-right! Nobody ever screw-up again. No more mister-nice-guy for me, because I ain't doing any more push-ups because of them."

"Don't worry sarge'. I'm going to straighten them out!" the Specialist asserted.

"Well," I continued. "Thanks for backing me up. If you need any help, let me know."

It was late by the time I got to bed that night. But, I didn't care. I knew that I had gotten control of this platoon, and that I had the full support of my deputies.

During the rest of the week I continued to hold nightly inspections. I kept the during the long weekend with classes on housekeeping in the barracks, how to march, military customs and lifestyle, the correct way to wear the uniforms, and other basic subjects. When the drill sergeants returned on Tuesday the barracks was already cleaner than when we had arrived. Everyone moved with a sense of purpose, no one looked lost, as my deputies moved about directing activities in each of the bays.

On Thursday we finished in-processing. The buses came, and we said our good-byes as the recruits were taken to their new basic training companies.

A few weeks later, I was walking back to my barracks after having finished dinner. I was thinking about my classes and a test that I had taken that day when my thoughts were distracted by someone calling, "Hey, Sergeant! Sergeant, it's us..." I turned to see a bunch of basic trainees taking a break under a tree, "Look you guys! It's SGT Bissett!"

It was several of the guys from the in-processing center. They picked up their rifles and came over to where I stood on the sidewalk. We shook hands, and they told me stories and jokes of what they had been doing since I last saw them.

"Hey, SGT Bissett," one of the soldiers said, "I want to thank you for helping us get ready for basic training. Our drill sergeant was really surprised when he found out that we already knew how to march, make our beds, and recite our General Orders."

"Ya, Sergeant," said another. "What you showed us really made a difference."

If there had been any doubt in my mind before about my decision to return to the Army, it was gone. In what I had done with those young men there is no equivalent in civilian life. Until that time, I didn't realize that within me this ability had developed. Being a soldier is not for everyone, but for me I knew I had made the right choice.