

Some Thoughts for Junior Officers On Making a Career Decision

by Lieutenant Colonel James F. Pasquarrette

If I were a junior officer today in the United States Army, I wouldn't know what to think of my institution. Multiple sources (email, surveys, magazine articles, and newspaper stories) proclaim that the Army is in trouble. Many of my peers are opting for civilian life. Separation time from my family continues to rise due to increased operational deployments. My equipment is aging with no plan to replace it. My pay is not commensurate with the required commitment. The field grade officers in my battalion — my gauge to the future if I stay in the Army — work horrendous hours. The senior leaders are out of touch with the climate at the small unit level.

On top of all this — there is not a clear explanation of how I fit into the grand Transformation plan. Most disconcerting, however, is the gnawing feeling that my time and effort are not being applied toward a consequential end. The nation is not at war. There is no Soviet Union to keep in check around the globe. Instead, the Army is relegated to preparing for an unlikely war and keeping hate-filled areas of the world from becoming Third World combat zones. In short, I feel a gravitational pull to follow my peers out the door to the civilian world.

In fact, I am not a junior officer. I am — in civilian parlance — considered “middle management,” a newly promoted lieutenant colonel. Before you stop reading what I have to say, let me provide a few words on my background for reference. I did not go to West Point. I was not a distinguished ROTC graduate — I received an “other than RA” commission. I am not a combat veteran. I am not Ranger School qualified. I spent 18 months after the Advance Course at division G3 and brigade S4 shops prior to getting a command. I did not get a second company command. I watched countless numbers of my peers — good officers with great potential — take a financial incentive to leave the Army in the early 1990s. I was not selected for early promotion to major or lieutenant colonel. I



Photo by Robert L. Stevenson

consider myself an average officer relative to my peers — many of whom possess more potential and ambition than me. I explain this not for humility's sake, but for credibility. I don't write this from the perspective of someone on the fast track to general officer. Rather, I explain my background to appeal to the junior officer who perceives himself or herself to be on the same glidepath that I have realized. It is most likely these officers who feel some pressure to leave the Army today.

Should you stay in or get out of the Army? It's a good question — one that every officer should seriously ponder before making a career decision. I was not committed to the Army as a career for many years. Like today, the cons seemed to outweigh the pros when I was considering the options.

Why leave the Army? There are certainly some good reasons. Some officers discover as a lieutenant that they simply aren't predisposed to be leaders. There are places in the other services for those without leadership ability. In the Army, there is not. If becoming independently wealthy is your driving motivation in life, then the Army is not the place for you. An Army officer's

salary can meet most of your needs, but will perhaps not meet all of your wants. It certainly won't make you a millionaire by the time you are 30 years old. If you are incapable of meeting the physical demands of the Army, you should opt for civilian life. Officers must lead by example on the PT field. Being overweight, out of shape, or unable to go to the field are simply unacceptable. There are other valid reasons to leave the Army based on the individual situation, but the reasons I have outlined apply to every officer and transcend time.

Why make the Army a career? There are many reasons, more than most realize. I'm thankful I stayed in the Army. It's the best decision — short of marrying my wife — that I've ever made. Outlined below are ten reasons junior officers today should consider making the United States Army a career.

First, you should stay in the Army because it needs you. You may not hear this from your chain of command, but it is the truth. A majority of the Army's reduction from 780,000 to 480,000 soldiers took place while I was a junior officer. In all honesty, the Army did not require my service. In fact, it would

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have been glad to do without me. The Army offered financial incentives to my peer group to attain end strength goals to avoid a painful Reduction-in-Force (RIF). Today, the drawdown is complete. The Army has been at a steady-state end strength for several years. Our Army is in the midst of transforming itself to address the realities of the new millennium. It needs good officers to see Transformation through to fruition, especially on the execution end of the spectrum. Today's junior officers are needed as tomorrow's middle managers and senior leaders in the Objective Force Army. In the interim, there will undoubtedly be periodic threats to the nation's vital interests. The National Command Authority will call upon the military to conduct operations to protect these interests, and soldiers will be sent into harm's way. Wars are human nature — and the nation will continue to need a combat-ready Army led by well-trained officers.

Second, the Army cares about your family. This was not always the case. When I was a company commander, there was not a Family Support Group program. Army Family Team Building and awards/recognition for spouses did not exist. The Army in recent years has come to understand that soldiers' families are an important part of the Army team. A soldier must be confident that his family will be taken care of if deployed away from home. Installation quality of life improvements are on the rise. They include Wellness Centers, Youth Centers, new hospitals, skate parks, new playgrounds, new schools, privatized housing, and family fitness centers.

Third, the Army is fun. You are paid to do things that those in civilian life pay for: jumping out of airplanes, riding in helicopters, four-wheeling in rough terrain, shooting all types of weapons — from pistols to tanks, “camping” in the woods, and playing “laser tag.” There are countless activities aimed at making life more enjoyable for soldiers that many take for granted: hails and farewells, free intramural sports leagues, unit sponsored

MWR trips, and Dining-Ins/Outs. The Army also ensures soldiers have time for fun. Every federal three-day weekend is a four-day weekend in the Army. Soldiers receive compensation time after extended field duty and units take block leaves once a year.

Not every day is fun. Combat readiness is serious business that requires soldiers to endure hardships that many civilians would deem unacceptable. However, the Army realizes that soldiers need leisure activities and time for fun to compensate for the hardships that training and readiness demand.

Fourth, the Army is about people. The other services are about ships, aircraft, or a mythical aura, while commercial industry is about the fiscal bottom line. There are few institutions that go to the Army's extreme to ensure the success of its individuals. A great example is the Army's emphasis on education: officer and NCO preparatory schools for each leadership position, GED and college programs for enlisted soldiers, degree completion for officers, and various master and doctorate degree opportunities. Additionally, the quality of the people in the Army is extraordinary. Though I admit to knowing little about the civilian world, I believe the quality of people in the Army is second to none. Dedicated, hard working, selfless, physically fit, intelligent, and trustworthy are representative traits of the average soldier.

Fifth, the Army is a meritocracy. Race, religion, ethnicity, and gender are secondary to performance. If you perform, you are selected for promotion and positions of greater responsibility. I am not too naïve to think there are not selection board racial and gender objectives. But this is a form of affirmative action as it was intended to be. There is not a quota system that elevates the unqualified over the qualified. Rather, there are simple checks to ensure selection board results represent fully qualified individuals from across the racial and gender spectrum. As a white male, I fully support it. In fact, I've become proud of it. The Army set the standard on this front for the rest of society — and continues to lead by example to-

day. Soldiers need to see leaders that look like themselves succeeding in the Army. It is intangibly healthy for the institution as a whole — and it's what makes the Army's fiber so strong.

Sixth, the Army senior leadership is committed to the good of the service. In the civilian world, the senior executives are often hired for their Ivy League education, ability to produce fiscal results, or to instill investor confidence. They quite often have no experience at the lower levels in the business they've been entrusted to lead.

Army senior leaders are grown from within — they've risen to the top of the institution through meritorious service. However, there seems to be a concern among junior officers today that Army senior leaders are disconnected with reality at the company level. I had my doubts with the senior leaders mid-1980s. I imagine a good portion of the junior officers in World War I, World War II, the Korean War, Vietnam — and the times in between — had concerns with the direction of the Army and the leadership provided at senior levels.

I believe concern for the direction of the institution at the lowest levels is healthy if kept in context. I've had the unique opportunity to see our senior leadership in action over the last 15 months. The experience has been refreshing. The Army's senior leaders are cognizant of the challenges today's junior officers face. Since they are products of the institution, they have experienced first-hand and are sympathetic to the dilemmas faced by junior officers. They dedicate an inordinate amount of their time on initiatives in support of the company commander.

Differences in opinion at the highest level are not based on the desire for personal recognition or selfish designs but on heartfelt beliefs on what is best for the Army. In short, I think junior officers would be surprised at senior leaders' appreciation of life “on the line” today.

Seventh, there are more opportunities than ever before for advancement. When I was a junior officer, battalion

command was the overriding qualification for selection to the grade of colonel. Today, there are multiple avenues to colonel — battalion command is no longer a prerequisite. The new career field personnel system will take a few years to solidify, but the end result will be more officers excelling in a field of endeavor in which they both enjoy and are best suited.

Eighth, staying in the Army allows you to be a part of an altruistic endeavor. Service to country was a quaint phrase as a junior officer. To be honest, it meant little to me. I was paying back my ROTC scholarship commitment. As I've matured, I now appreciate the importance in having a core of individuals that commit themselves to protecting our nation's way of life. The eventual realization that you are committed to something more important than yourself is therapeutic in myriad ways: it becomes easier to get up in the morning for PT; there is a rationalization for the forced separations and long work hours; and you realize that the size of the paycheck isn't the measure of a person.

Ninth, the Army is a great institution. It's sometimes hard to recognize this fact as a junior officer. The Army for me was initially more a job than a career; more a paycheck than a profession. Once I committed to a career in the Army, the worthy facets of the institution came into focus. Perhaps it is human nature to accentuate the positive upon commitment to a career course of action. I started noticing that Army Values are more than something worn on the dog tags. It is a standard — an expectation for behavior — that I have come to cherish. Many institutions claim adherence to a set of values, but the Army lives it. Those that don't meet the standard leave the Army by various means. Those that do meet the standard thrive in the Army.

Finally, making the Army a career allows you to continue being a soldier. There are few endeavors as honorable. You will continue serving your country alongside the national treasure — the patriotic men and women that made a decision to serve their country. I didn't fully appreciate the privilege of serving with soldiers until the end of my com-

pany command time. My only experiences as a junior officer were on or near Army installations. I had no reference point to judge a soldier's standing to those not in the Army. Since my company command, I've had several assignments that placed my family in non-military communities. At social gatherings, I was struck by the admiration and interest others had in me simply because I am a soldier. In turn, their lives seemed incredibly dull. Children are sometimes the best judge of what is important. My son, a fourth grader who attends an affluent Catholic school in Atlanta, was asked by a friend what his father does for a living. Jay unassumingly answered, "He's in the Army." The inquiring boy felt compelled to hide the fact that his father was a lawyer, doctor, or some other well-compensated professional (I forget which). Instead, the boy told Jay his father was "a policeman with a gun." I'm sure the other boy's father makes much more money than me, but Jay's friend knows "there's something about a soldier."

I realize that my reasons for making the Army a career may sound ridiculous to the average junior officer. I know they would have sounded ridiculous to me ten or twelve years ago. The junior officer reading this probably envisions me awaking to the National Anthem each morning, walking around with a silly smile on my face all day, and singing "The Army Song" with my family before bed each night. In reality, I think I am a fairly average person that thoroughly enjoys what I do for a living. What I have outlined above is simply how I feel — and how I think most officers feel that make the Army a career. Not every day in the Army is nirvana — but on the whole, the good dwarfs the bad. The Army is much more than "a great place to start." It is a great place to enjoy an exceptionally rewarding career.

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