

L200 – Crucible Experience

*Death of a Close Relative*

As a 21 year old college student who recently enlisted in the National Guard I had it all figured out. Take advantage of the monthly pay checks from the Guard and join R.O.T.C. to finance my way through college. Upon graduation, commission into active duty in the Army for four years, becoming debt free and have a child or two, capitalizing on the medical benefits of the military. My plan was simple; complete college, become dept free, start a family, and then leave the Army and find a job that would, quite honestly afford more stability, less danger, and hopefully pay better than continuing service. Just months from graduating college and starting my plan I received a call that would become my crucible experience and challenge me to change my plans toward personal service and commitment. The dreadful call was that my cousin, who I often thought of as a big brother, was shot thirteen times and passed away after responding to a noise complaint while on duty as a city police officer. This “crucible experience” not the event itself, but the reflection upon it, and my cousin’s courage and service has had an impact not only on my leadership philosophy that I have adopted over time, but also my personal commitment towards service. In this paper I will describe how this crucible event has molded my values and leadership style over time.

Growing up in a small town has its challenges, beside parental influence it can be difficult to find peers and mentors as rural life often physically separates neighbors and, outside of school, there is often little contact with peers. Some find that a brother or sister are often their best friends as they grow up, someone to look up to or help you through life, for me that person was my cousin Shane. Shane was eight years older than I, he was there when I needed a hand whether working on my jeep in high school or later while in college picking me up and driving me home when I knew I had too much to drink. One call and I could always count on my cousin

to be there. One year, after returning from Basic Training, Shane and I spent months together ice fishing, trapping, and working on projects. Shane always had an ambition in keeping things maintained and took a good deal of pride in his work. Of all my relatives, including my sister, Shane was the one that seemed to always be there to lend a hand, serve as a mentor, or just be a good friend when I needed one.

After finishing college Shane was not too decisive of what to do, he would have liked to serve in the military, but some existing medical issues made that option not possible. With a degree in fish and wildlife management he tried some state work with fish counts and collection studies but it seemed to miss a key ingredient to making him happy. Shane wanted to serve or work in a profession that allowed him to help others solve problems and, I think, serve as a leader, role model, and someone his parents would be increasingly proud of. He again attempted at receiving a waiver to enter the service as he thought that serving in the military would be the right fit for him, but he was again turned away.

Finally, although he had two unrelated college degrees, he decided to enroll in the state police academy to serve on a city police department. There his tireless work ethic and appetite for helping others led to him graduate at the top of his class. Shane always would go out of his way to ensure others succeeded. I fondly recall that he was running daily with one of his academy classmates who was having difficulties completing the two mile run required for graduation. Shane worked with his classmate for four weeks running sprints and laps around the track often after long days and late into the night to help his classmate succeed. When the day of testing came his classmate failed the run by seconds but was allowed to test again the next day. With strong winds on the day of the retest his classmate was about to give up. Shane organized a group of six classmates to run in front of the student to help block the wind and with their encouragement and wind barricade he made it with almost full minute to spare.

Shane then later receive accolades from his department and the rookie of the year award where he quickly rose to a rank of senior patrol officer in a short period of time. Shane, like me at this time, had a plan but his was different. Instead of focusing on himself, unlike my plan that only focused on me, his focused on continued service in the police department, starting a family with his wife, and improving the in-school education programs that the police department was just developing. Shane put other's goals and programs well ahead of his and he was more than the guy that would give you the shirt of his back, he was the epitome of selfless service.

Reflecting on Shane's commitment, selfless service, and sacrifice shortly after his death drove me to change my decision about a limited service period with the military to one of continued service and making a better impact as a leader. Over time I determined that the most important thing in life is not the individual but rather compassion, care, and genuine concern for the well being of others. The mentorship and spirit that Shane instilled in me as a standard bearer through his profession has and continues to be a cornerstone of my leadership philosophy. He taught me that a mentor is someone who counsels, teaches, rewards, allows others to reach their full potential by learning from their mistakes, and make corrections on-the-spot when they fall short. His work ethic and pride in ownership and the organization continue to be what I call key ingredients to ensuring readiness towards meeting requirements and are at the heart of the warrior ethos.

This deadly event where Shane was shot and killed came as a shock and devastating blow to friends, family, and me. Shane was not only my cousin and friend; he was my mentor, coach, and teacher. In reflection I believe his passing was the catalyst that drove me to examine my plans and to determine what are the important events and objectives in life. This reflection and the application of what Shane instilled in me developed my current leadership values and philosophy. His commitment, work ethic, pride in ownership, and open willingness to improve conditions for others has and will continue to be a lasting part of who I am.