

THE "D-WORD:" DOWNRANGE AND AT HOME

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It is my experience that a divorce in your personal history remains a stigma in today's society. When divorce is brought into conversations, people automatically think of “failure” as you narrate your version of the story. What typically makes the topic uncomfortable is the sense of being judged or analyzed for traces of dishonesty. It almost feels like a lawyer building a case; although I'm not a lawyer, I can relate. If you are a male divorcee, imagine the law modified to “guilty until proven innocent.” All sarcasm aside, the social stigma weighs-in especially when trying to move on and rebuild your life. I have gone through two divorces during my years on active duty service. The focus of this writing is how these events shaped my life and how only after significant reflection I've been able to continue serving our Nation. I divorced once during a one year deployment to Iraqi (OIF-1), and a second time after returning from a fifteen-month deployment to Afghanistan. Overall, I have 10 years of active duty service with three deployments of 12 months or more (two to Iraq and one to Afghanistan).

Break-ups can cause a myriad of effects on an individual, however they can certainly “make or break” a person occupying a leadership position. Divorces, in a sense of changes on a person's feelings and acting on those feelings, are nothing new; people have been “jumping ship” since pre-history. Undoubtedly, overcoming this event could validate a person's character as a leader. Yet, leadership challenges are different depending on what position is held at the time, especially if deployed. There is a difference between a Soldier going through divorce while in a non-critical position, and going through one as a key leader from a company, battalion, or above. Supervisors can often levy the Soldier's work load so he or she can manage the situation. Key leaders, such as company and battalion commanders, executive officers, primary staff, and senior non-commissioned are faced with a slightly different set of variables. The difference is not in how they cope with divorce, but in the dilemma of focusing on the mission downrange versus on the “home front.” Not that the mission in garrison is less important, but serving in key leadership positions while deployed

often preoccupies a person's mind on and off duty --you are on duty when you wake up and off duty when you go to sleep (not always an exaggeration). These factors, among other things, increase the significance of dealing with a divorce while in a key leadership position. During my second marriage, I was brigade HHC executive officer in the 173rd Airborne Brigade deployed to northern Iraq, and it proved to be the hardest time of my life --crucible if you wish.

In my experience, once the "d-word" was brought into daily conversations between me and my spouse who was halfway around the world there was little I could. The harder part was coming to terms with the fact that life had continued its course for my ex-wife while I thought it was under control, or at least on "tactical pause." I thought issues could be dealt with upon re-deployment, but it was too late. Simple disagreements grew over time and I was ten-thousand miles away unable to mollify the situation. Mood swings and discussions over the phone or email were doing nothing but making things worse. In the meantime, the workload continued to pile on. Tasks that use to take me a few hours now required more effort and concentration. Re-deployment operations from a theater that in the previous year was completely under enemy control seemed like an overwhelming task. Support systems were in their infancy; the plan was to convoy for three days in a row, from northern Iraq (Kirkuk Airfield) all the way down to Kuwait, in order to return home. I had to make a personal decision. It may sound cold, but similar to a bad investment, it was time to cut my losses. Not letting go was negatively affecting job performance, and while deployed this could translate into someone's life, including my own. It was enormously hard and frustrating to realize there was nothing I could do to improve the situation at home. I left Italy having a family, two kids and a wife (almost six years of marriage), and I was returning to a complete void --an empty apartment and maybe a car. It took more than a few weeks to cope with the initial wave of frustration, but after making the decision to let go everything became clearer and job performance improved. In the meantime, regular visits to the unit's Chaplain and extensive talks with friends contributed to feelings of hope and a realization that

there was life after the hurtful event. Things started to look better and I began focusing on the mission again. Coordination to re-deploy the unit was well under control, and my state of mind changed to “that which does not kill him makes him stronger.”¹ Little did I know that six years later I was going to be exposed to divorce all over again. The difference the second time is that I was in garrison serving in a non-critical leadership position.

In the beginning of the relationship things were progressing; we decided to formalize the relationship after a permanent change of station became inevitable after my completion of the Captains Career Course. I received orders to report to 4/101st Brigade Combat Team at Fort Campbell, a unit scheduled to deploy within six months of my arrival. After having two more deployments under my belt, time away from home drove a wedge between us that became hard to overcome. After almost five years of marriage, we were struggling to stay together. The “d-word” was again on the table. We tried marriage counseling, couples therapy, friends and family, you name it... but nothing worked. This time around I was an assistant to a mid-level staff officer at division level. In garrison and not in a key leadership position significantly changed the dynamics of an otherwise stressful event. Compassionate senior leaders gave me the necessary time to assimilate the situation with my ex-wife, take marriage counseling, and eventually follow through with the legal nightmare. All things considered, it took almost a year to close the divorce, but the availability of services, counselors, legal advisors, good leadership and friends made all the difference.

With the benefit of hindsight, both events have shaped my life, and indirectly, my military career. Today I tend to have more prudence when things are drifting away in my relationships and act upon matters early to avoid misunderstandings. As a leader, I have more empathy with subordinates as they go through rough times in their lives. Identifying Soldiers in need and providing them with the necessary tools and guidance to restore their lives is a personal satisfaction of mine. Needless to say, I value family time more than ever. Yet, being away from the people I care for the most have not been easy (my parents, siblings, and more importantly my children). And yet, I have learned to leverage technology

and use all available tools to strengthen those relationships to the point of earning their support of my career.

The hardest lesson learned in my life is one of balance, as cliché as it may sound. Considering the sacrifices of serving in our outfit, it becomes an art to balance personal goals with relationships. Despite the fact that long term separation will have an impact, focusing more on quality time prior to deployments makes all the difference. As rewarding as it is to dedicate one's life to attend the needs of our great Nation, caring for family and friends is what will most certainly give you a future to look forward to when the mission is completed. Nonetheless, surviving divorce as a leader fundamentally changes your life. Only deep reflection and persistence, enabled by resiliency, allows you to stand up for the eighth time and regain the strength necessary to continue to lead.²

¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, (Hertfordshire, UK: Wordworth Editions Limited, 2007), 175.

² From the Japanese proverb "fall seven times, stand up eight."

Bibliography

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