

Semper Fi

by Samuel Mitchell

Student - 2nd place Middle Section

Wilson Central High School

Wilson County



What generates happiness in the lives of the misfortunate is a mystery to many people, just as the influences that keep us going amidst our trials remain a question for me. As with most Americans, I constantly disregard how blessed I am to live in a First World country. Food, clothing, and shelter: these are all things that millions lack in their daily lives, yet all that we can think about is attaining more. A major problem in today's society regards the question of what we value and why. Many people my age (myself included) often ignore the importance of family and community. Whether or not we accept the notion, community is a vital component in achieving happiness (and consequently success) in one's life. It was in the absence of friends and family that I truly relied on my instructors for guidance and support.

Not long after I moved to Tennessee from Connecticut, my family started facing financial problems which eventually led to the loss of our home. It was at this time, the beginning of my freshman year, that I came to the conclusion that the G.I. Bill would be my last hope for a paid education. Despite some drawbacks which would inevitably impact my social life, I realized that the most responsible decision was to join my school's JROTC (Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps). Although it meant frequently wearing a uniform to school as well as keeping my head shaved, the pre-military program would eventually qualify me for two promotions once I enlisted in the Army. It was at my introductory JROTC meeting that I first encountered instructors Chief Dempsey and Major Jimenez, two military veterans who would later help me through one of the most challenging parts of my life.

JROTC was more than a hope for my future, but an escape from my living situation as well. Though I had been blessed with a loving family and trusting friends, there was a small sense of abandonment influencing my freshman year: My parents still cared for me as much as ever, but they were constantly preoccupied with maintaining an income and keeping us afloat. The rest of my family was in the northeast and it was only growing harder to keep in touch. The few friends I had from middle school wound up ditching me not long after our freshman year started; I could still understand their point of view as far as the negative social image concerning JROTC went. Even David, my older brother and best friend, had further limited his infrequent communication with me (though I later realized that he had his own dilemmas which justified his limited contact). Being at home was the worst of all, however: Having moved from an upscale house on fourteen acres in Connecticut to a single-wide trailer in the backwoods of Tennessee

was depressing to say the least. JROTC kept me busy and away from the reality of my situation; most important of all, it kept me productive.

One of the program's greatest benefits was its capability of producing motivation. All of the cadets wanted to achieve the same objective: superior rank. For me, it was not so much about gaining power or respect as it was about no longer being subject to the authority of the immature cadets whom I didn't respect. In the pursuit of achievement, I joined every JROTC-related activity in order to gain more experience; my instructors helping me along the way. Though the instructors only taught the academic class, it was during the Rifle Team and Drill Team trips that I truly got to know them. The first week our instructors taught us the basic military formations, dress code, and guidelines; the rest of the time they left us under the instruction of the upperclassmen. Though not always present in all JROTC activities, the instructors were well-aware of the teams' progress as well as the individuals' improvements. I do not remember many details, perhaps it is for the best, but I do remember finishing off my first semester with a 4.0 GPA and the most ribbons in my grade.

After a fair amount of time in their program, my parents and I got to know the instructors a little more. Chief Dempsey was well aware of our financial situation; not far into the year, he arranged to get my Rifle Team entrance fee funded when our family could not afford the fee. Chief Dempsey and Major Jimenez never stopped supporting me when I needed the help. Long after the last time we spoke with him, the Chief called me into his office shortly before Thanksgiving to ensure that our family had food. I got to know Chief Dempsey most personally over the duration of my time spent in Rifle Team. When we would participate in competitions, it was the Chief who would usually offer to drive us on the long road trips. On more than one occasion, I witnessed him purchase lunch for a less fortunate cadet.

Though I did not know Major Jimenez as well as Chief Dempsey, I knew him as a good man primarily through reputation. The Major often assumed the responsibility of facilitating conflict resolution among the cadets. He had little tolerance for bigoted remarks or slander within the ranks. One rare quality that both he and Chief Dempsey shared was their sense of humor; they often stressed that a good leader requires a sense of humor in order to stay balanced in stressful situations. Though it is often hard, if not impossible, to have a personal relationship with a commanding officer, it is evident that these instructors take a strong interest in their cadets and offer something more than just training: genuine compassion. Both of these men are veterans who have been in combat and this gives them an advantage that most teachers lack; they are used to taking responsibility for the well-being of individuals.

Between the support of my instructors and the demanding schedule of the program, I was able to get through my freshman year with a positive mindset as well as a sense of accomplishment. In June of that year our family came into an inheritance which got us out of the trailer and gave me a slight hope for a funded education outside of the G.I. Bill. One question remained for me: did I want to stay in JROTC, take orders from other cadets, and maintain the safety of the G.I. Bill, or find out what I truly wanted to do in life (if not enlist)? Unfortunately, the decision was made for me. That same month, my older brother David was killed in a motorcycle accident; after that, I chose not to continue with JROTC: I did not wish to handle the stress of taking orders from cadets I did not respect only a month after my brother's death.

In addition, I could not put my parents through the stress of my eventual deployment, having already lost their first son.

Once I came to the decision to leave JROTC, I realized that it would be harder to tell the Chief and the Major than any of the friends I had in the program: they had given me so much. The first day of sophomore year, I waited until the classroom had cleared to turn in my uniform. I was not sure how Chief Dempsey would react to me leaving so unexpectedly; especially after all of the support he had given me the previous year. When I approached him I apologized for the short notice and handed in my uniform; he simply smiled and said, "Well, we'll always remember you the same." I could tell that he had an understanding of the emotions I was feeling, just as he could tell that I was making the choice I needed to at the time. Both of these instructors consistently demonstrated graciousness, compassion, and understanding while maintaining military discipline. Any teacher that can carry one of these traits beyond simply educating, to me, is inspirational.

