

## Everything I Needed To Know...

“Things are seldom what they seem... skim milk masquerades as cream... highlows pass as patent leathers... jackdaws strut in peacock feathers...”  
This and much more to the same point by W S Gilbert in HMS Pinafore.

In my college days - the mid 50's - young men universally believed that time spent in the military was time wasted. This was not a reflection on our patriotism, or lack of it. We had all been raised with a finely-tuned sensitivity to the obligation to serve. Most of us had fathers who were veterans of World War II, and many had brothers who had served in Korea. But there was no shooting war at that moment. Korea was just over, and the Viet Nam agony was yet to come. So, this was not about our patriotism.

We were fully prepared to serve our time, but no one looked forward to it. We spent our college years trying to postpone it. The peacetime military conjured images of mind-blurring drudgery drilling under hot sun and peeling potatoes. Time spent in uniform was universally seen as time that could be far better spent in graduate school... or starting a career... or a business... or a profession like the law or engineering or architecture... or even getting married. Young men everywhere were looking for more productive ways to get on with their lives. None of us saw the military as a growth experience.

How wrong we were. The great surprise was what a life-shaping experience the military proved to be. For me, a lifetime lesson in “Things are seldom what they seem.”

For most of us, the ROTC was the surest way to stay in school and finish our undergraduate studies... and then serve our time in the military as officers. One of my classmates at Princeton was a very unusual sort of fellow who thought serious thoughts while we occupied ourselves with more sophomoric pleasures. He railed against the presence of the ROTC on the campus. From a soapbox (literally), he inveighed against the military industrial complex (the first time I ever heard the phrase) trespassing in the halls of academe. Since most of us regarded the ROTC as our personal

protectorate in those years, we did not take kindly to this fellow's views and made his life miserable as only the young can do. This was Ralph Nader: I have long suspected that in those years we shaped his antiestablishment views.

A fleeting two months passed between graduation, commissioning, and being called to active duty at Ft Sill, Oklahoma as a newly minted Second Lieutenant. And it was there that my larger education in the ways of the world began. For the next two years my personal learning curve, as the saying then went, was vertical. Let me share with you just a sampling of the principal lifetime lessons the Army taught me...

My first big learning - and it came like a glass of ice water dashed in my face - was that there was absolutely nothing special about me. This was a humbling but unavoidable insight. I had been raised with the understanding that my Ivy League education and privileged upbringing set me well apart from (one might say "above") most of my fellow citizens. Not at all, it turned out. Nothing could have been further from the truth. Things are seldom what they seem. Not only did my fellow soldiers fail to show me any particular regard, it never occurred to them that they should. And to my utter astonishment, it turned out that many of them were better than I at what was being asked of us. Again, I say, a humbling experience.

My first acquaintance in the Army gave me a preview of what was to come. His name was Carter: Peg Carter. He hailed from somewhere in Missouri. Because his name fell next to mine in the alphabetical roster, we bunked next to one another, shared our shelter halves on bivouac, teamed in learning how to disassemble machine guns... we were thrown together over and over again.

On first meeting, we sniffed each other over like two dogs. He made the first move:

"Where did you go to college?" (We were all new graduates from one college or another).

“I went to Princeton.”

“Never heard of it,” he replied. I thought he was kidding... but he wasn’t.

“It’s in the Ivy League,” I said, hoping to clarify things.

“What’s that?” he asked. I tried to explain, but he didn’t get it.

“Well, where is this Princeton?” he asked.

“It’s in New Jersey,” I said.

“Where is that, exactly?” he asked.

“It’s near New York.” I said. That satisfied him, but there was more to come.

He was dismayed to find that we had no fraternities at Princeton. He was astounded that there were no coeds. And that no cars were permitted. He was darkly suspicious of anyone who belonged to an institution so determined to stamp out worldly pleasures: was this Princeton a Catholic school and were we all priests in training, he asked? He had absolutely no knowledge of Victorian literature (my major in college). He was a proud graduate of the University of Missouri Ag School: “I majored in Swine,” he told me, “but with a minor in Poultry.” There were zero points on which our cultural literacy intersected. It could not have been a sharper contrast. Few things that I thought were important were even known to him, and vice versa.

But here was the amazing thing. Despite all our differences, he was a nice guy and we became good friends. It also became increasingly clear in the following weeks that there were a number of things that he did better than I. Important things, like instinctively grasping principles of leadership. Like taking easy charge of situations where it was unclear what needed to be done. Like catching the eye of the senior officers who were ever on the lookout for the most promising candidates for more responsibility, and

getting promoted to Battery Commander, in charge of forty other lieutenants, including myself.

Even as all this was happening, it puzzled me. Was I, whose background was so totally different from his, coming in second best to him? Second best to someone who had never heard of Princeton or the Ivy League, wasn't sure where New Jersey was, and had never read a proper book? Were his skills and talents of greater value than my enviable background? And did I still like him, nevertheless? Beyond liking him, I actually found myself respecting him: I don't think I had ever respected someone my own age before. It came as a whole new idea that someone with so much less traditional world experience than I deserved my respect. Here was a lesson learned! We have long since lost touch, but I suspect that today he presides over a vast pork empire, and runs it brilliantly.

I came to know another lieutenant as green as I named Aaron Bagdasarian. He had gone to Yale: at least he knew about the Ivy League, and where New Jersey was. But I had never ever - at Princeton or anywhere else - sought friendship with someone with a name like Bagdasarian. I had kept a mistrustful distance from people of other ethnic backgrounds. Now I found myself irresistibly drawn into friendship with the kind of man I had long been suspicious of. We had read the same books, enjoyed the same movies, thought the same things were funny, liked and disliked the same fellow officer trainees. We sought out shared assignments, sat together for endless training classes, and drank beer together at the Officers Club. Amazing! Another lesson learned!

But there were other revelations lying in wait for me. In the course of time, I began to encounter lieutenants who had earned their gold bars in OCS - Officers Candidate School. This was a much more demanding route to becoming an officer than ROTC. Many of them had been enlisted men before being selected strictly on merit for OCS. And, with very few exceptions, they were better officers than I because of it.

Best of all were the West Pointers. Their four years of training put them leagues ahead of the rest of us... which was as it should have been: they

had all made a commitment to the military that far exceeded ours. They were not all exceptional, but the average West Point graduate was twice the soldier we were... and the best of them were beyond comparison.

In other words, I now found myself - after years of the finest preparation for life that money could buy - no longer in the Ivy League of life but in the third tier of candidates for success and increased responsibility. This was a revelation: a new truth for which I was utterly unprepared. It gradually became apparent to me that if I was going to have any success in this environment *I would have to try harder*. Another lesson learned!

While I did not fully grasp what the Army was teaching me at the time, I was learning a priceless life lesson: the importance of talent and ability. Talent and ability are where you find them: the Ivy League does not have a corner on them. There is plenty of talent at the University of Missouri Ag School. More than any other intangible, talent and ability are what make the difference in life. And if you find yourself competing with others more talented and able than you, you will have to work harder to make up the difference!

And what a priceless lesson this turned out to be later in life, when I found myself enrolled in the intensely competitive world of Procter & Gamble marketing, pitting my undergraduate degree in Victorian Fiction against MBA's from America's leading graduate business schools! It was the ROTC officer competing with the West Pointers all over again!

A key part of my military learning experience had to do with discovering the importance of sergeants, and enlisted men generally - but especially, sergeants. Nothing happens in the Army without sergeants making it happen. The new lieutenant, lacking any useful military experience, finds himself in command of sergeants with years in the military, who know just about everything. This is tricky. You have to learn how to draw on the sergeant's superior experience in a respectful way without compromising your superior rank. And this, too, is a lesson fully applicable to civilian life - especially, life in a large corporation. You won't accomplish a thing without

the support of the sergeants! You must earn their respect, and be prepared to learn from them and depend on them.

I was blessed with a wonderful Master Sergeant, Jack Parker. We shared many interests, and mutual respect and friendship flourished. But when he saw me making a wrong decision, Sergeant Parker would clear his throat and ask, in a respectful way, "Is the lieutenant sure about that?" It was time to listen! And here was an invaluable lesson learned. The best managers I ever worked for at P&G were also the best listeners: it always pays to encourage people who have a concern with whatever you are planning to step forward with their concerns, and you must learn to listen carefully and respectfully! Chances are, you'll be glad you did.

I also found myself learning about esprit de corps. In an Army that I once dreaded being a part of, a new dimension of pride and love of country was awakened in me that I had never felt before. I even learned to take satisfaction from something as laborious as military drilling, parades and pageantry. In the Army, large scale military reviews are unavoidable, and they always involve thousands of men standing in formation in the hot sun, waiting, waiting, waiting, and wondering why you are there. And then the drums begin, and suddenly you find yourself standing taller. There is something primal in the sound of drums: armies have marched to them for centuries. And then the brasses sound their call. And somehow you feel a new sense of pride in being a member of that brotherhood. I was learning that it is a very fine and valuable privilege to be able to take pride in your nation, in the organizations you belong to, as well as your life's work.

One final very basic learning: respect for a well run organization, and the men who run it (they were all men in those days). The U S Army is one of the largest organizations in the world, and it functions amazingly well. Yes, mistakes are made and things go wrong: how could it be otherwise in an organization of over a million soldiers? But it is very well designed and organized to do its job. With occasional exceptions, the men and women who lead it are well chosen, well trained, have earned their positions responsibly, and they deserve my respect. This was a very useful learning

for me when I parted company with the Army and joined another large organization just a few blocks from where we sit tonight.

Two years of mindless drudgery? Time better spent in graduate school? I think not! What graduate school teaches the kinds of lessons I learned in the Army? I see my two years in the military as one of the most useful, important, and shaping learning experiences of my lifetime... a far cry from the empty years of mindless drudgery I had been led to expect. For me, the Army turned out to be much more an opportunity than an obligation. A prime example of things not being what they seem!

What a shame that all young men do not have this growth opportunity today, as they start out in the world. I miss the draft!

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Read as part of a budget at the Literary Club of Cincinnati on February 27, 2012