

# 'Confessions of Mediocrity'

by 1LT Paul A. Brannan

*(Editor's note: Although Army professional bulletins do not usually publish personal essays, this compelling appeal for professional development and mentorship is worth ARMOR readers' notice.)*

Bottom line up front: I expect my future to be filled with failure.

I have never been particularly book smart. At school, I was always more of doer than a thinker. As a result, I went to Maneuver Captain's Career Course (MCCC) at Fort Benning, GA, with every expectation of all that "brain stuff" being a challenge.

A key part of MCCC is putting together operation orders (OPORDs) and briefing them to an instructor. One of my OPORDs did not go particularly well, and the senior officer grading it tore my presentation and analysis to shreds. Truth be told, he probably wasn't as harsh as he should have been. After such a terrible mess, I headed home and drowned my sorrows in single malt whiskey.

The next morning I dragged my worthless carcass over to Harmony Church to meet with (and maybe get some help from) a drill sergeant, SFC Dave Whitehead, with whom I had deployed during my career as an enlisted medic. A little more than a week later, he arranged for me to present my OPORD again, this time to him and a roomful of basic trainees. I started out by explaining to the new recruits that I was also in school at Fort Benning, that officers were also expected to keep improving their skills. I told them I would appreciate their help because I needed to work on building OPORDs so I could do it right when there were lives (possibly theirs or those of their buddies) on the line. So I presented the OPORD again, and this time it was not a senior officer critiquing me but a roomful of future tankers. When I finished, I had them backbrief me on parts of the plan so I could see how effective I had been in imparting the mission details. I had them ask questions on points they didn't

understand, then these new Soldiers gave me open and honest feedback about what they thought was good or bad about my presentation.

When they left, Whitehead gave me his critique. He told me my presentation was not perfect, but I had "tightened my shot group" and incorporated the feedback the original grading officer had given me. He also gave me some pointers from what he had learned when he went through a different Army school. As a result, at my next MCCC OPORD, I was able to incorporate the feedback from Whitehead and his recruits.

What's interesting about all this is that at the same time I was practicing my skills at giving a presentation to an audience, the new recruits were getting the chance to experience receiving a mission briefing. While I was developing my skills at which parts of the order I needed to emphasize most, they were developing their skills at identifying which part of the mission they needed to understand most. As I had the opportunity to practice explaining how the enemy would attack using Soviet doctrine, they had the opportunity to begin thinking about how their enemy may deploy and behave in combat.

Beyond the information contained in the presentation, I sincerely hope the new recruits also learned a couple of other key points. First, that officers are human; officers can make mistakes, and they need to develop their skillset just as much as an enlisted Soldier does. Second, although the recruits are new to the Army and "low on the food chain," there is nothing stopping them – like there is nothing stopping me – from increasing their Army skills, embracing education opportunities and one day being Army leaders standing in front of Soldiers laying out their own mission plans.

As I say, I'm no thinker; I was always that kid who got into (read: led others into) trouble. I figured that fools may rush in where angels fear to tread, but the angels are all in heaven, and there

are no shortage of fools on earth, so what's the worst that can happen? I made, and somehow survived, more than my fair share of mistakes. I was lucky, though, to have parents, great teachers and key mentors who all imparted one vital fact to me: people make mistakes. **Mistakes are the fodder for real learning.** Someone who never fails is either perfect (which certainly doesn't describe me) or is never willing to push himself. Most mistakes aren't that big a deal, really. Because failure isn't the big deal; it's the giving in to failure that is. Over the years, my quixotic impulsiveness and lack of smarts ensured I had plenty of experience in failure; my tenacity (read: bloody-mindedness) drove me to keep trying until I overcame the challenge.

Sometimes I see hesitancy within the Army to step outside our comfort zone, to embrace the challenges and failures that come with striving to "be all we can be." While I was in Officer Candidate School (OCS), our commander was a strong believer in running as the key fitness skill and we ran a lot; coincidentally, he was a fast runner. One of my old battalion commanders was a firm believer in resistance training (which, coincidentally, he was awesome at) and focused less on running. When, as a junior enlisted Soldier, I was being taught the Warrior Tasks and Drills, it seemed every instructor insisted that the most important skills were the ones at which, coincidentally, he was most capable.

On the flip side, I remember at Armor Basic Officer Leadership Course (ABOLC) talking to a fellow student who was on the verge of a panic attack because he had failed a test. He was very worried that he might fail the re-test and get recycled. He was a smart young man, with a first-rate education and good brain, and failing a test was a new experience for him. Somehow in all that good education he'd never gotten knocked down, so he'd never had to get himself back up. All his previous experience of success had denied him the chance to build up the necessary resilience for standing firm against a minor setback.

Good leaders fail sometimes. They get over it; they get on with trying again. Real leaders see their failures as potential learning points for themselves and others. For example, I had the honor of being at one of the first briefings MG Sean MacFarland gave his subordinate commanders when he took command of 1<sup>st</sup> Armored Division in May 2013. Rather than regale us with a list of his great achievements, he told us about how, as a young lieutenant, he had almost been fired as a platoon leader. As a company-grade officer, I appreciated knowing that my division was led by a man who had the humility to embrace his own challenges and the resolution to keep pushing himself until he reached his current rank, and it was the ideal introduction to who my new commanding general was as a person.

**T**his hesitance to embrace challenge – to truly *test* ourselves – bleeds over into how Army schools are conducted. When I attended Warrior Leaders Course (WLC), I found much of the curriculum to be about “checking the block” and everyone getting a “go.” Out of my WLC class, every student passed – even the ones who got into trouble, failed the Army Physical Fitness Test (APFT) or otherwise didn’t perform to standard. Likewise, shortly before I left my line unit to attend OCS, my platoon received three new Soldiers straight from advanced individual training (AIT) – all of them failed the first APFT I gave him. One had spent most of AIT on profile and hadn’t had to do any physical training, and another told me he’d been allowed to graduate on the basis that the unit he went to (i.e., us) would improve his physical ability. Since we

were a platoon of line medics, I can only hope there weren’t similarly relaxed standards for his medical training. Downrange, when you are fatigued and stressed, and a real individual needs his medic’s attention, the old Grim Reaper is rarely willing to “check the block.”

**A**s U.S. presidents Theodore Roosevelt and Richard Nixon noted, there is no effort without error and shortcoming. The schoolhouse needs to be the place where we are pushed to our limits and then a little farther, where we develop our skillset and make mistakes. If students aren’t being challenged by what they are taught in Army schools, the bar is probably set too low. Beyond the schoolhouse, if we wish to consider ourselves as professionals, we need to put our egos aside and seek out what we cannot do, rather than congratulate ourselves on what we can. In training we need to take risks that we won’t be perfect; we need to take risks that we’ll fail at some things. Only when we do will we truly learn something new; only when we do will we grow as leaders of men.

My ability to produce OPORDs is still behind that of many of my peers. I know it’ll take me time to reach their level of expertise. However, as long as I am willing to embrace my shortcomings and continually practice the skillset involved, I will get better; indeed, by committing myself to improving, I’ll eventually overtake those of my fellow students who have far more natural talent but who discard what they were taught once they graduate MCCC.

Hopefully, I will never stop rushing in where angels fear to tread, never stop finding myself in situations where my plans go down in glorious flames. If ever timidity or ego tempers my actions, if failure becomes something to avoid, then I need to be concerned.

Because that is when I will have truly failed.

*1LT Paul Brannan is a student in MCCC’s Class 07-13. He previously served as a rear-detachment commander in 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion, 17<sup>th</sup> Infantry, 1-1 Armored Division, Fort Bliss, Texas; executive officer, Company C, 4-17 Infantry, 1-1 Armored Division; Mobile Gun System (MGS) platoon leader, Company B, 4-17 Infantry, 1-1 Armored Division; senior line medic, Company B, 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion, 64<sup>th</sup> Armor, 4<sup>th</sup> Brigade, 3<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Division, Fort Stewart, GA; and platoon medic, Company D, 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion, 64<sup>th</sup> Armor. In addition to MCCC, 1LT Brannan’s military schooling includes ABOLC, Fort Knox, KY; and OCS, Fort Benning. His civilian education includes a bachelor’s of science degree in psychology from the Open University, a distance-learning pioneer in the United Kingdom, his home country.*

## Acronym Quick-Scan

**ABOLC** – Armor Basic Officer Leaders Course  
**AIT** – advanced individual training  
**APFT** – Army Physical Fitness Test  
**MCCC** – Maneuver Captain’s Career Course  
**OCS** – Officer Candidate School  
**OPORD** – operations order  
**WLC** – Warrior Leaders Course