

CHAPTER 3
**THE PSYCHOLOGY OF
CONNECTION**
MILITARY LESSONS

"Faith is taking the first step even when you don't see the whole staircase." -- Martin Luther King Jr.

Toward the end of high school, my life was a balancing act. I played soccer, football, and ran track for my high school, was working at Lafonda as a cook, going to school, and juggling the demands of teenage life, social and otherwise. On the surface, I was productive. But underneath, I lacked direction. My academic performance was mediocre, and I had no clear plan for what came next.

Then I walked into Señor Garland's Spanish class. Despite my struggles with his subject, we had a natural rapport. He never made me feel small for barely passing, and he never let my grades define me. What I didn't know at the time was that he also worked in the summers as a firefighter with the U.S. Forest Service.

One day, he casually asked if I'd ever considered being a firefighter. I was a teenager struggling for direction in my life, and this question from a trusted mentor opened my mind to a possibility I'd never

thought about. He could have left it there, but he didn't—Señor Garland helped me apply to the Forest Service and served as a reference. I didn't know it then, but that wasn't just a job or a next step—that was the first part of a career that shaped who I am.

What Señor Garland did for me was more than a professional favor, it was an act of selfless service. He didn't help me because I was a standout student. He helped me because he saw potential buried beneath uncertainty. He looked past our differences, past my academic shortcomings, and he chose to invest in me to the point of recommending me to his boss.

Key insight: Sometimes your circle includes people who believe in your potential more than you do. Great mentors don't wait for perfection, they nurture possibility. Señor Garland saw something in me that I couldn't see in myself. Exceptional people recognize and nurture potential in others, even when it's not immediately obvious.

MY PATH TO MILITARY SERVICE

By June 1999, I was growing restless. I hadn't heard back from the Forest Service, and the silence was eating at me. What had started as a spark, planted by Señor Garland, had grown into a full-blown wildfire of ambition. Just like my teenage obsession with soccer, I was now consumed with the dream of becoming a firefighter. I didn't just want it, I *needed* it. But it wasn't happening.

A year prior, my friend Andy Trujillo had joined the Army National Guard. I met Andy through his brother Tony, with whom I played soccer. Much like my relationship with Ruben, Andy and I clicked instantly. He quickly became another brother in my ever-growing chosen family.

Andy was brilliant-effortlessly sharp in a way that made me both admire and envy him. While I had to grind for every grade, Andy seemed to coast through school with ease, often turning in top-tier work with what looked like minimal effort. But it wasn't just intelligence. He had wit, purpose, and a way of making you feel like everything was going to be okay, even when it clearly wasn't.

One moment in particular stands out. I had procrastinated, badly, on a paper for one of my classes. I had a D in the class, and this assignment was make-or-break. If I failed, there was a real chance I wouldn't graduate. When Andy picked me up that morning, I climbed into his car with the weight of the world on my shoulders. He noticed immediately.

"What's up?"

"I blew it," I responded, dejection in every word. "I didn't write the paper. I'm toast."

He paused, then: "What's it about?"

I don't remember the topic. What I do remember is Andy telling me to grab my notebook. As we made the less-than-10-minute drive to school, he rattled off ideas, phrases, and vocabulary that sounded like they came from a college professor. He actually said the words "veritable cornucopia" and other gems that I would have never thought to use. By the time we pulled into the school parking lot, I had a rough draft in hand.

The next day, my teacher, Mr. Barnes, asked me to stay after class. I gulped. Remember: I had a D in his class at this point. He handed me my rough draft. On top, in bold red ink, was an "A."

Then he said words that still echo in my mind: "I knew you were capable of great writing when you applied yourself. Thank you for finally putting in the effort. I hope you continue to do so."

I was stunned. Ecstatic. And, if I'm honest, a little heartbroken. I knew he was right. I *was* capable, I just hadn't put in the effort to prove it to him or to myself.

So, thank you, Andy: for the ride, the words, and the belief. And Mr. Barnes: I'm sorry for waiting so long to show you what I could do.

REFLECTION: THE ETHICS OF HELP AND THE POWER OF EFFORT

Looking back, I realize that sometimes our connections help us in ways that blur ethical boundaries. I'm deeply grateful for Andy's help with that paper; it was a lifeline that morning in the car. But it also taught me a hard truth: Authentic success comes from personal effort. Real support doesn't replace your work; it strengthens your ability to do it.

Thankfully, most of Andy's help over the years has come in ways that truly supported my development. He made introductions, offered advice, and helped me navigate personal and professional crossroads. Those moments inspire me. They remind me of the power of genuine connection and the importance of showing up for others in ways that build, not bypass, their growth.

One of those pivotal moments came when Andy suggested I talk to his dad, John, a recruiter for the Army National Guard. Andy had heard there were firefighter roles within the Guard, and he thought it might be a good fit for me. That suggestion opened a door I hadn't known was available and awakened something deep inside me.

Growing up on movies like *Rambo* and *Navy SEALs*, I had always admired the idea of being a soldier. The discipline, the purpose, the camaraderie all resonated with me. But until that moment, it was more on-screen than real life.

After a few conversations with John, an ASVAB test, and signing my name on the dotted line, I headed to Fort Knox, Kentucky, for basic training. It was the start of a new chapter, one that would challenge me, reshape me, and teach me lessons I'll carry for the rest of my life.

THE PRIVATE SMITH REVELATION

Disclaimer: The following story represents training methods used in military basic training circa 1999. Individual experiences vary widely, and these methods may not reflect current military training practices. This story is shared to illustrate lessons about human assumptions and potential, not to represent universal military experiences.

Basic training was a transformative period in my life. I could probably write an entire book just on the lessons learned during those intense weeks. But for now, I want to share the most important story from that time. It's a story of human connection and how shared struggle can dissolve even the deepest divides.

My platoon, the Mad Dogs, was a true melting pot. We had recruits from (almost) every race, age, background, and belief system. About the only class that wasn't represented in my platoon was the wealthy class. We were a collection of young men from working-class neighborhoods, rural towns, and inner cities, each carrying our own baggage, assumptions, and biases.

The drill sergeants knew what they were doing. They intentionally paired us with our "opposites," someone who looked different, spoke differently, or came from a background we didn't understand. It was uncomfortable. We were forced to confront our assumptions, our judgments, and our fears. As we did so, something powerful happened.

As the days wore on and the physical and mental challenges intensified, those differences faded. When you're crawling through mud carrying a 60-pound pack, engaging in hand-to-hand combat with

your bunkmate, literally running miles on no sleep, and pushing your body to, and sometimes past, its limits, you stop caring about where someone's from or what they look like. You care whether they've got your back. You care whether they'll help you over the wall, carry your gear, or shout encouragement when you don't think you can keep going.

Any preconceived notions about race, class, or background were gone, left behind in the mud and sweat. We realized our successes and failures were shared. If one of us fell behind, we all did. If one of us pushed forward, we all moved ahead. The platoon became a unit, not just in name, but in spirit.

That experience changed how I see people. It taught me that connection is not about similarities, but about shared purpose. It's empowering to realize that beneath the surface, we are more alike than we may think and that we need each other.

THE DIVERSITY ADVANTAGE: STRENGTH IN DIFFERENCES

I learned a lot in basic training about military tactics, weapons, and physical endurance. But the most powerful lesson, which has stuck with me all these years, was about people. Some of the most effective teams I've been part of weren't built on similarity; they were built on diversity. People of different backgrounds, races, experiences, and perspectives came together to form something stronger than each of us as individuals could offer. When everyone in the room agrees, tough problems rarely get solved. That's the danger of *groupthink*—it creates comfort, but not progress.

In basic training, our platoon was a living example of this principle. We were tough, no doubt. But we were also chaotic. Fights broke out almost nightly as soon as the drill sergeants retired for the evening. We made dumb mistakes, repeatedly, and paid for them in sweat and

sand in "the pit"--the basic training version of consequences. After getting smoked for the fifth time in one day, one drill sergeant shook his head and said, "You guys might be dumb, but at least you'll be strong." It was brutal honesty, and it was true.

Among us was one soldier who stood out, and not in a good way. We'll call him Private Smith. He was last to formation, first to bed, and lagging on PT runs. His mistakes got us all smoked more times than I can count. I pride myself on patience, but even I was nearing my breaking point.

After a while of this, Private Smith was placed on suicide watch. We never learned the full story, but the drill sergeants took it seriously. On top of our regular duties, CQ (Charge of Quarters, or guarding the entrance to the barracks) and firewatch (another guard duty), we now had to take turns watching him sleep. Our already limited six hours of rest dropped to three or four. Tension in the platoon was boiling over. Sensing the danger, our drill sergeants gathered us in the bunk room for a conversation that would stay with me forever.

"Who in this room has had enough of Private Smith?" A few hands shot up.

"Go on! Raise your hands! I don't blame you! Smith is lazy, out of shape, and constantly messes up, resulting in the platoon getting their butts kicked. If I was in your shoes, I'd have my hand raised."

More hands went up. I was hesitant, as many tricks had been played on us at this point. I felt like we were being set up for something devastating.

"Okay, there's more honesty. I see some of you aren't afraid to call a spade a spade! Who else? Every hand should be in the air!"

One by one, the rest of the hands in the room went up. Even though I was still hesitant about what was coming, I had to respond to the

drill sergeant's call for honesty. My hand went up. When all members of the platoon had their hands in the air, the drill sergeant continued.

"Now that we're all being honest, let me ask you this: who has had a serious conversation with Private Smith?"

About half of the hands went down, including mine.

"Private Jones, your hand is raised. Where did Private Smith grow up?"

"Uh...I don't know, drill sergeant!"

"Private Carillo, what did Private Smith do before joining the Army?"

"I don't remember, drill sergeant!"

"Everybody, put your hands down. None of you know him. None of you tried!"

Then the drill sergeant shifted gears.

"I know you all have checking accounts, because that's how the military pays you. But who here has bought a house?"

Most of us were in our late teens or early 20s, and only one hand was raised this time.

"Okay, who wants to buy a house someday?"

Every hand went up. Remember, I came from humble beginnings, and many of the origin stories in that room made me look like I was raised wealthy.

"If you idiots had taken the time to talk to Smith, you'd know he's from South Carolina. He worked as a banker for five years. He's helped more people buy homes than any of you have helped do anything. He joined the Army out of patriotism, not for a paycheck. And instead of helping him succeed, you all hoped he'd fail."

That moment—that devastating twist I was afraid was coming—hit like a punch in the gut.

We had judged him based on what we saw in the barracks, not who he was as a person. We missed the value he brought because we never bothered to look for it. That day, I learned one of the most important lessons of my life: **Every person you meet knows something you don't. Every person has something to teach you, if you're willing to listen.**

THE 36-LAP LESSON: RUNNING TOWARD UNDERSTANDING

The meeting ended. We were quiet as the drill sergeants walked us to the running track, where we ran 36 laps, one for every man in the platoon. Although I could gripe and moan about the additional running, it was a brilliant way for us to let the lesson sink in.

As I ran those laps, questions flooded my mind:

How many people in my life have I dismissed without truly knowing them?

How many had knowledge that they would freely share if I would have just asked?

How many opportunities for growth, connection, and understanding have I missed because I was too focused on my own frustrations to see someone else's humanity?

That run wasn't just about endurance. It was about accountability. It was about recognizing that every person we encounter has something to offer. If we truly want to build strong teams, strong communities, and strong lives, we must learn to elevate each other, not tear each other down.

The Hidden Value Principle: Seeing beyond the surface

Every person you meet has unique knowledge, experience, or skills that could benefit you, and from which you could learn. Private Smith's banking background could have helped fellow soldiers with financial planning, home buying advice, and financial literacy. But until that conversation, no one took time to discover his expertise. Once the rest of us actually took the time, we realised that Private Smith had many additional talents, and he ultimately became a valued member within the platoon.

The lesson: Approach relationships with curiosity, not judgment. Ask about their backgrounds, their skills, their experiences. You'll be amazed at what you uncover when you stop assuming and start listening.

In hindsight, I can now see that many of the tactics the drill sergeants used weren't just about discipline. They were masterclasses in psychology, self-awareness, and team building that subtly focused on the importance of empathy, connection, and the danger of assumptions, all designed to shake us out of individual experiences and become a functioning team. It worked.

Putting It Into Practice

This week:

1. **Identify your Private Smith:** Think of someone you've dismissed or underestimated. Look for their hidden value.
2. **Practice active curiosity:** In your next five conversations, ask two questions about the other person for every statement about yourself.
3. **Check your assumptions:** Write down three assumptions you make about people based on appearance, job title, or background. Ask yourself why you make that assumption and when it has been or could be wrong.

This month:

1. **Diversify your circle:** Attend one event outside your usual industry or social circle.
2. **The hidden value exercise:** Have coffee with someone whose background is completely different from yours. Learn about their expertise.
3. **Share your story:** Share one professional failure or learning experience with a trusted colleague.

Next three months:

1. **Find a mentor and a mentee:** Find one person to mentor and one person to learn from in different fields.
2. **Map your connections:** Create a visual map of your relationships, identifying gaps in diversity of experience, industry, and background.
3. **Monthly assumption check:** Implement a monthly practice of questioning your first impressions and seeking deeper understanding.

CHAPTER SUMMARY: THE HIDDEN VALUE IN EVERY CONNECTION

This chapter explored one of the most transformative lessons I've ever learned: the power of human connection and the hidden value within every person we meet.

Your network isn't just a collection of contacts. It's a living system of people, each with their own skills, expertise, and networks, who offer value to your personal and professional life, who see things you may not—including your own potential—and who can offer different perspectives on problems and ideas you're facing. These relationships, especially when they are diverse in background, race, and expe-

rience, are essential for growth. Diversity is a strategic advantage that prevents groupthink, enhances problem-solving, and brings fresh perspectives to complex challenges. These are the people on the path with you as you reinvent yourself.

We also uncovered a critical truth: **Every person has hidden value.** Whether it's life experience, professional expertise, or emotional insight, people carry wisdom that can change your life if you approach them with curiosity instead of judgment. Assumptions are shortcuts that often lead us away from where we want to be—away from those meaningful connections. When we take the time to ask, listen, and learn, we unlock opportunities that would otherwise remain invisible.

CONNECT Framework Application - No Judgment and Nurture Relationships: This chapter demonstrates two more elements of the CONNECT framework. The Private Smith story shows what happens when we approach people without judgment and take time to nurture understanding. The 36-lap reflection period represents the kind of investment needed to build authentic relationships that see beyond surface-level impressions.

The lessons I learned in the military about empathy, teamwork, and the danger of assumptions proved essential as I entered the professional world. However, knowing how to connect is only part of the equation.

Next, I had to learn how to turn those connections into authentic *opportunities*.

Chapter 3 Interlude

The military taught me to see past my assumptions and recognize hidden value in every person, but these lessons needed real-world testing. Understanding that everyone has something to offer is powerful, but learning how to transform that understanding into actual opportunities requires a different set of skills. As I prepared to leave active duty and enter civilian life, I discovered the same principles of curiosity, authenticity, and relationship building could open doors that seemed impossible to access. My next challenge was applying these connection principles to achieve what I thought was impossible: landing my dream job in a highly competitive field where relationships would prove to be the deciding factor.