

(Continued from website—a jump back in time)

Kuwait 2008:

Coaching. Encouragement. Counseling. The young lieutenant colonel sitting across from me will need all I've got. DB Collier commands my Security Forces squadron at one of the largest US Air Force bases in the Middle East. He's a recent staff college graduate with smart, out-of-the-box ideas on the type of host-nation rapport required to reduce the terrorist threat to our base.

"What I'm planning, Sir, is a desert diwaniya. It'll bring the locals and the Kuwaiti Air Force security forces together with my downtown contacts to talk about mutual protection out here."

Collier has only been here two weeks longer than I have. I'm still working on meeting my Kuwaiti Air Force hosts and my US Air Force subordinates. Lt Col Collier already has contacts in Kuwait City. I'm impressed.

"That's going to take more than one meeting," I remind Collier. "Lots of cultural differences there. Not just us and the Kuwaitis, but military-civilian and urban-rural. It might take a bit."

"I think it will go faster than you think, Sir. The Kuwaiti security folks say the locals work best if they're lit up a little. So the downtown contacts are taking care of that."

"I'm not following."

"The downtown folks are bringing the booze. Just to get things loosened up. My Kuwaiti counterparts say this is how it works out here."

"What the hell are you talking about, DB? We're not allowed to drink here. Alcohol is illegal in Kuwait. We can't even attend functions with alcohol."

Collier's expression is somewhere between a smile and confusion. "Yes, Sir. I got all those briefings. You don't think I would allow any of my personnel to consume alcohol, do you? We are just taking advantage of an opportunity presented to us in the name of base security."

"No, you're not. It would be one thing if you showed up as a guest and discovered they were breaking Kuwaiti law. But you planned this."

"Sir—"

"DB, you and your team will not be attending this meeting. Do you understand?"

Frustration radiates from my squadron commander. I've derailed his detailed plans and canceled his commitments to his new contacts. To his credit, his answer is brief and clear.

"Yes, Sir."

A month later, Ali Al-Salem commander Brigadier General Khalid and I are enjoying *knafeh*—a sweet, crunchy, cheese pastry—with his seventeen brothers in a tent forty miles farther out in the desert than the air base.

"Tell me more about these drones you are using for perimeter security," Brig Gen Khalid says. "Lt Col Collier gave us a night-time demonstration and told my security forces that they can get a commercial version at a reasonable price."

"That's great, General." US and Kuwaiti exchanges like this are part of our mission. I'm just surprised the event never made my weekly staff meeting slides. "Sorry, I couldn't join you. When was that?"

"Several weeks ago. My team was meeting with your personnel, a security team from Kuwait City, and some local leaders to talk perimeter security."

The next day, Lt Col Collier sits across from me, shaking his head. “You told us not to go because of the alcohol. I arranged for them to make it a dry event. They did. Sir, I don’t see the problem.”

“I told you not to go. You went.”

“But I removed the obstacle, Sir.”

“After they agreed not to bring alcohol, did you consider coming back and telling me?”

My question feels rhetorical to me. Of course, he didn’t ask again because there was a risk I might still say no.

“Sir, I’m sure you don’t expect me to report all my successes to you.”

Not the answer I expect. We discuss the issue for another ten minutes. If Lt Col Collier is unsure about my thoughts on his behavior, he is clear after my final words.

“You will consider this discussion to be verbal counseling. We’ve got nine more months together, DB. I never thought I would say this to one of my squadron commanders, but if you disobey another order, I will put the counseling in writing. Got it?”

“Got it, Sir.” Instead of shellshocked, Lt Col Collier looks disappointed. Like, his boss just doesn’t get it. And that makes me nervous. My experience with my best subordinates has been that if they know more than I do, they don’t advertise it in their expressions, but in their actions.

It’s going to be a long nine months

Virginia Tech 2016:

Captain Gambrell raps on my office door. “Sir, you have a moment?”

“Yep. Grab a chair.” I move from my desk and sit across from my top instructor. Capt Gambrell’s a mustang—he spent ten years enlisted before commissioning as an Air Force officer. Headquarters recently recognized him as the Company Grade Officer of the Year for the ROTC Southeast Region. “What’s up?”

“It’s TSgt Faricy.”

I’ve talked to Capt Gambrell about TSgt Faricy before. Two years of coaching and encouragement have not brought the NCO’s performance up to the level I expect from a section chief. He manages to get to work on time—mostly—but struggles with project completion. My predecessor proved prescient. I often give projects to SSgt Angelo rather than endure the personal commitment required for me to coach TSgt Faricy to the finish line.

“What now?” It’s wrong, but a part of me considers how much easier things would be if TSgt Faricy did something so clearly wrong that firing him was the only option.

“That’s what I wanted to ask you about, Sir. Morale has tanked. SrA Castle and SSgt Angelo have too much to do. When TSgt Faricy gives them performance feedback, he’s telling them they need to work harder. While he’s sitting on his ass. Meanwhile, our cadets’ opportunities are in jeopardy because their paperwork is only as good as the admin office makes it.”

“We haven’t missed any suspense. We haven’t had any lates,” I say. “The field training rankings just went in this morning. On time.”

“Sir, Capt Oliver and I came in last night after everyone else went home and helped SSgt Angelo finish the rankings. Otherwise, it would have been late.” Capt Gambrell pauses, like he’s struggling with how to say what he wants to say next.

I've had subordinates suggest how I should do my job before. Some are subtle. Some are arrogant. Several have provided valuable feedback that made me a better leader. A few have had their ass handed back to them as I quietly kicked them out of my office. Capt Gambrell's enlisted years mean the age difference between us is much less than normal. I respect his judgment. But he's holding back.

"You think I should have another talk with TSgt Faricy?" Twenty-two months is what I'm thinking to myself. Just under two years until I retire.

Capt Gambrell shakes his head. "I think you should fire him."

The mustang's declaration hangs heavy. They are the right words, ones the commander I was in Kuwait would have used without hesitation. But that commander had a decade of service ahead of him; this one is already surfing the internet for a retirement motorhome.

I run the mental checklist required to fire an NCO: the documented counselings, the legal reviews, the performance reports, the months of administrative warfare. The mountain of paperwork will dominate my final two years.

"I know it's a heavy lift, Sir," Capt Gambrell says. He's been carrying the unit's morale on his back. "But it's even heavier for all of us if he stays."

I look past him, toward the hallway where my "okay" performer is likely kicking back after the staff finished the package he was supposed to complete. Twenty-two months. If I fire Faricy now, I spend my sunset tour in a trench-fight with headquarters. If I keep "coaching" him, I've got a smooth ride to the finish line.

I've always told my students that leadership is about doing the hard thing because it's the right thing. Now I'm looking for a way to do the easy thing and make it sound right by calling it "patience."

"Let me have a talk with him," I say. Gambrell's eyes shift to his knees. "I'll try to get through to him one last time."

We both know what's happening. I'm not coaching Faricy. I'm just racing him to the exit.

Kuwait 2009:

I stare at my judge advocate general. "You've got to be shitting me."

"It's right here, Sir." Maj Dawson pushes a paper across the table.

I grab it and read: *LETTER OF REPRIMAND, SMSgt Lewis, Security Forces*. I scan the first paragraph for the list of things this Senior NCO has done wrong and then read Lt Col Collier's name and signature at the bottom.

Having my JAG show me the letter is an ass-backwards way for a wing commander to discover a Senior NCO is in trouble. Usually, the squadron commander notifies group and wing leadership immediately. But this is bigger than local protocol. Our theater commander, Lt Gen Southard, requires CENTAF HQ to review every written reprimand for Senior NCO ranks and higher. By failing to inform me, Collier hasn't just kept a secret—he's stalled a mandatory reporting chain that leads straight to the General's desk.

"Any chance Lt Gen Southard's staff got a copy of this and I'm just the last one to find out?" My voice carries a hopeful tone. I'd rather I had been the last one to know about this letter than have my boss asking me why he hadn't heard about this.

“No, sir. As far as I can tell, they did not process the letter. We asked for it when SMSgt Lewis’s evaluation came to us for a review.”

Fifteen minutes later, Lt Col Collier takes the place of my JAG in the seat across from me.

“Sir, I never meant for the letter to go into his evaluation report. That was an error on his supervisor’s part. We were keeping the letter at the squadron level.”

“You mean like in your desk drawer?” I say, familiar with the concept of using the threat of a letter as a Strike One. Definitely against the regs, but not unheard of.

“No, Sir. We processed the letter through admin, but didn’t push it up the chain. This is my problem to work through, so I kept it at my level.”

I run through the regulations with him, just like I did several months before in a meeting with all the squadron commanders. “What part of notifying your group commander, me, and the CENTAF commander do you not understand?”

“Sir, this is Leadership 101. My Senior NCO messed up. I disciplined him. It’s my issue. I got it.”

Lt Col Collier leaves our command with a Letter of Reprimand—one that I signed, and sent forward to Lt Gen Southard for his review. The letter remains part of his permanent record. Lt Col Collier never becomes Colonel Collier.

Virginia Tech 2018:

As I roll into the last months of my 30-year Air Force career, with my retirement paperwork filed and final out-processing physical scheduled, I take advantage of the opportunity to talk about leadership to my graduating seniors. Each of them will pin on Second Lieutenant rank in a few short months.

I have no shortage of anecdotes to share with our future officers. My experience with Lt Col Collier is my go-to story when I want to talk about taking consistent and decisive action.

We were in a hostile fire zone with an operational picture that varied day-by-day. As a commander, you not only owe it to your entire team to provide them with leaders who will follow orders, but you also owe your unit-level subordinates the understanding that you will listen to their leaders when they disagree with you.

That only works if your subordinate commanders communicate with you. A subordinate commander who goes rogue and leaves the rest of the organization in the dark doesn’t just harm morale; they can put everyone else in danger.

Sometimes you have to make the tough call and remove them.

I speak confidently when I tell the story. I’ve never doubted that the actions I took almost a decade earlier were the right ones. Leadership requires consistency across time—that coaching, encouragement, and sometimes counseling—not just correctness at the moment.

But there’s another lesson that I can’t bring myself to share with my future officers. One I’m struggling with as I pack my office supplies away into boxes and trade addresses with the other service’s ROTC commanders. I’ve talked plenty about leadership success. I might have mentioned a few leadership failures. But I haven’t talked about the cowardice that looks like patience. I haven’t told them that sometimes, “coaching and encouragement” is just a convenient excuse for a commander who is too tired to do the paperwork required to fire someone who deserves it.

The rap on my office door is my replacement, Col Ricky “Gonzo” Adams, a 1992 Virginia Tech graduate who flew B-52 bombers most of his career. We fill our coffee mugs and talk transition. I’m excited about our four instructors—three captains and a major—and know I’ve left the academic side of our department in great shape.

“What about admin?” Col Adams says. “I know how it is with small units. You live or die based on your paperwork and morale.”

“You missed SSgt Angelo,” I say. “She was the Southeast Region NCO of the Year and just moved back to a cyber unit at Langley. But her replacement, SSgt Owens, comes in with rock star credentials. Everyone is raving about her already.”

“What about TSgt Faricy? I met him when I was doing my in-processing. Sounds like he’s been here a while.”

I take a sip of coffee. Capt Gambrell passes my open door but doesn’t look inside. He doesn’t have to. I’m about to commit the final sin of a departing commander. For four years, I’ve chosen the easy way out under the guise of coaching.

In Kuwait, I sacrificed Collier’s career to protect the integrity of our mission. At Virginia Tech, I’ve been sacrificing the mission to protect my own interests—and disguising it as sage leadership.

“TSgt Faricy?” I look Col Adams in the eye, and pass him the same burden my predecessor had passed to me four years ago. “TSgt Faricy is an okay performer, Gonzo.”