



This post is part of a series of weekly professional discussions that occur on Twitter among military leaders in the United States and students and professors at Kings College in London. If you're interested in participating just "tweet" your response with [#CCLKOW](#)

Throughout a career in the military, almost everyone takes on assignments and positions that negatively impact our outlook on continued service. While lying in bed at night, we question whether or not we made the right career decision, and when we wake up, we dread the drive onto base. Some of these assignments even lead to negative experiences where we fall flat on our face, time and time again. The key thing to remember in these assignments is that we have a choice. Whether it's working for a toxic leader or spending time in a job that isn't a great match for our skill sets, we choose the outcome of these experiences. They can either devastate us or develop us.

Path of Devastation

I've served with many officers throughout my career that landed assignments that "broke the camel's back" and "pushed" them out of the military. Several of these were extremely talented individuals who felt like their current assignment was just a precursor to a career full of downs with no ups. Their positive outlook quickly dimmed into one of constant negativity. They hated their positions so much, that they couldn't see beyond the next PCS.

Several former officers that I've spoken to can even name the leader they worked for that "made up their mind" about getting out of the military. While the profession of arms isn't for everyone, it is tough watching a great officer or NCO leave the military because of a single assignment or a single individual. They came in with high aspirations, but left feeling defeated.

Path of Development

Every experience we encounter in the military will develop us if we allow it to. Some of the roles I've served in, such as basic training executive officer and assistant to the assistant operations officer, haven't been the easiest or most rewarding assignments, but they did afford me the opportunity to learn some [great lessons](#) that have stayed with me throughout my career. They also exposed me to aspects of the military I didn't like, which led me to better understand what types of jobs I wanted to seek out along the way.

An example of turning a devastating experience into a developmental one is found in working for a toxic leader. While working for a bad leader is never a dream job for anyone in the military, these individuals can present us with an excellent opportunity for development. In his book, [The Lessons of Experience: How Successful Executives Develop on the Job](#), Professor Morgan McCall Jr. observed that leaders who've worked for a toxic boss, and learned from that experience, turned those less desired traits into guidelines for their own behavior. Some of my own passion and enthusiasm are a direct result of these types of developmental experiences.

The Rocky Road to the Top

Leaders such as George Washington, Ulysses S. Grant, and Dwight Eisenhower, all who are regarded as great captains of war today, were dealt professional setbacks early on in their military careers. These negative experiences could have "pushed" these guys out military service; however, these individuals allowed those experiences to develop them instead.

George Washington

Both Don Higginbotham's [*George Washington and the American Military Tradition*](#) and David Fischer's [*Washington's Crossing*](#) shed some light on our first President's early military career. Higginbotham describes Washington's ambitions of receiving a royal commission from the British crown and how they never materialized, thus demoralizing a young George Washington. Fischer highlights his humiliating defeat during the French and Indian Wars where he had two horses shot out from under him. While these experiences could have deterred an up-in-coming officer, they didn't; they developed him. It was during this period of his career that he learned about leading colonists, about dealing with civilians, writing orders, as well as the administration and logistics required for maintaining a large force. The setbacks of his youth paved the way for the new nation that would follow.

Ulysses S. Grant

In his [*Memoirs*](#), U.S. Grant recounts some tough setbacks in the winter of 1862 during the Vicksburg Campaign in the western theater of operations. Not only was their animosity between him and his boss, but critics back in the North pronounced him "idle, incompetent, and unfit to command men in an emergency." It was during this period in which he saw greener grass on the other side of the fence. He wished to command a brigade in the eastern theater of operations, where he felt like the main stage of the Civil War was located, and his skills were better suited. When one of his subordinate officers suggested that Grant make an application to leave the command and serve in the east (we all hate to see a good leader get hammered), Grant told him about a principle that he lived by: "In positions of great responsibility everyone should do his duty to the best of his ability where assigned by a competent authority, without application or the use of influence to change his position." The position that he refused to leave would eventually become a stepping stone to leading the Union Army to victory.

Dwight Eisenhower

One of my favorite articles from *Military Review* is Robert C. Carroll's [The Making of a Leader: Dwight D. Eisenhower](#). Carroll follows the career of Eisenhower and highlights his numerous "career-ending" jobs, and how those positions developed Ike into the great leader he eventually became. He wrote the piece to "inspire the occasional Army officer who faces a career assignment not preordained by conventional wisdom to be on the perfect glide path to greatness."

Not all of our experiences in the military are going to be glamorous or success stories, but every single experience offers us a lesson or two. In the end, diversity and adversity can develop us into stronger leaders and how we choose to accept that experience will either devastate us or develop us.

This brings us to this week's discussion question:

As leaders, how can we get the most out of career setbacks, tough assignments, and bad bosses? Additionally, how can we help subordinates or those we mentor through these experiences?

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