



By: Major Bob Gordon

Imagine you've been married for more than 15 years. There have been ups and downs, but for the most part, it has been a fun, exciting, mutually beneficial, and fruitful relationship.

Then one day, your spouse comes to you and says, "Look, this isn't working out. It's not me – it's you. You're just not good enough. I want a divorce, but not right away. You're going to stay married to me until our twentieth anniversary. Until that time, I expect you to act and perform your duties as my spouse, but you will receive none of the benefits and perks of being married. No date nights, no back rubs, no rewards, and no physical activity between us, unless I decide that you're required to perform such acts. Just do as you're told. Then, once we've hit our 20-year anniversary, you can divorce me."

"But wait a minute," you argue. "That's not fair. After all I've given you, now you just tell me we're done, that we have no future, but that I still have to do all this work for you? Forget that! I want a divorce today if that's how you feel. There are other fish in the sea!"

"Oh, you want out now?" your spouse responds dryly. "Fine. Go ahead and walk. Oh, but do you remember that joint account we opened together back when we got married? If you walk away before we hit our 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary, you get none of it. If you stay though, you get half of it, for the rest of your life."

"Fine," you relent. "Can I ask just one thing though? Can you please not tell any of our friends? If I have to live like this, at least don't let anyone know. I'd be so ashamed."

Your spouse chuckles. "Of course I won't tell them. Oh, but I do need you to continue wear

this gold oak leaf pin on all your clothes. That way everyone knows we're still married, but that you weren't quite good enough to go the distance. Think of it as your own, personal scarlet letter."

Begrudgingly, seeing no other viable options, you agree.

"Now, chin up, darling. No one wants to see a sad sack in our home. Get to work. The dogs need to be fed, and that laundry isn't going to wash itself..."

While this is a somewhat absurd story, it is in fact exactly what the Army does when it selects certain officers and NCOs for continued service (SELCON) after being passed over for promotion. With the expiration of the Temporary Early Retirement Authority (TERA), under which some officers and NCOs were allowed to retire with between 15 and 20 years of service - with full benefits except for a reduced retirement pay - this will become a new norm for the foreseeable future.

It is a frustrating, painful, and anger-inducing experience, and one that we all hope we will never have to endure. Unfortunately, it does happen. Sooner or later, nearly everyone in our line of work gets passed over for a promotion. And for those of us who have experienced it much sooner than we had expected, though we may want to shake our fists in rage at the Army, at our past bosses, and at our promotion and evaluation systems in general, the fact remains that we are probably not going to change the system, and we're going to have to endure the pain and frustration until we are allowed to retire.

So we have a choice: wallow in cynical sorrow, or make the best of a bad situation?

Trust me, I know how appealing the cynical route can be. I still catch myself from time to time falling into it because, like Anakin Skywalker being tempted by the Emperor, the Dark Side can feel so good. It is also, of course, completely self-destructive.

So you've been passed over for promotion and then told you have to continue to serve if you want to receive the benefits you've earned. How do you deal with it? I certainly don't have all the answers, but here are some things I've learned as I've gone through this experience.

### ***Be frustrated... privately.***

Look, you're not going to get over the feeling of rejection that comes with being passed over in a week or two, or even in a year or two. I'm basically a happy, cheerful person, but when my close friends ask how I stay positive after all that's happened in my professional life, I

just reply with my best Bruce Banner / Hulk impression: “That’s my secret... I’m always angry.”

It’s okay to be angry and hurt and frustrated. Watching your friends get promoted to a new rank while you continue to wear the same one you’ve had for years will feel like it’s burning a hole in your chest. You wouldn’t be human if you didn’t feel that way. But you can’t let that anger become who you are. It’s healthy to express those feelings, but you also need to remember that this is a life-changing event; not a life-ending event.

Find an outlet for those emotions. Start a journal. Go for a run. Take up kickboxing. There are countless healthy, productive ways to process anger. Find one that works for you, get those feelings out when the frustration takes over, and then get back to the other, better parts of your life.

### ***Manage expectations... and get used to disappointment.***

Time for some blunt talk. For better or worse, right or wrong, the Army has determined that you have achieved your potential for advancement within the Army. Worse than that, rather than letting you move on with your life by retiring early, the current policy states that you’re probably going to have to continue your career as a “terminal Major” for the next three to four years if you want to earn your retirement benefits. That means watching your peers – and eventually your subordinates – get promoted over you. That means saluting friends when you’re out in public. That means a lot of private teeth grinding. Get used to it.

This is where you really start to get the feeling of wearing a scarlet oak leaf. Every time I run into an old friend or acquaintance I haven’t seen in a while when I’m in uniform, there is always an awkward moment of realization: *You’re still a Major? What happened!?* Then I have to explain, over and over, my story of woe. It gets old. Get used to it.

The same goes for assignments. Depending on your timeline, you’re probably going to have to move one or two more times before retirement. When it comes time to PCS, you’re probably not going to get those choice jobs in great locations. Even if you meet the exact qualifications for a number of jobs, if it’s a Joint job or a traditionally pre-command job, you’re not going to get it. As far as Big Army is concerned, you’re needed to fill personnel requirements, but you’re also damaged goods. Get used to it.

Wherever you end up though, build your own reputation. In many ways, you are free of some of the competitiveness that develops between post-KD Majors. You already know your fate. So do the best you can to set yourself up for life after the Army, while still contributing

to the team.

### ***Be a (small) team player.***

Speaking of contributing to the team, remember that you are still on a team. It's okay to be mad at the Army. It's okay to be mad at those who contributed to your circumstances. But it's not okay to take it out on the team that you're still a part of. Whether you're working on a Division staff, somewhere in TRADOC, or anywhere else they send non-promotable Majors, you still have something to contribute. You can be mad and bitter and frustrated (privately!), but you can also be a positive part of whatever team you are on.

For example, my personal experiences as a Major have also caused me to take a critical look at several of the Army's systems. In my current job at MCTP, I'm able to use that critical viewpoint to help improve staffs across the Army; to recommend doctrinal changes through exercise reports and lessons learned documents; and hopefully to gain support from decision-makers who can make changes to those systems. It's small, but it still provides me with some purpose in getting up and going to work every morning. And being part of that team has made all the difference.

### ***Get help.***

Failure is excruciatingly painful. It can cause depression, strained relationships, and even suicidal thoughts. It is far more difficult to endure if you try to do it alone.

For me, I would not have been able to endure the pain and sorrow I felt without my family, friends, and therapist.

First and foremost, I had to get past the feeling that my family - my wife, my children, my parents - would see me as a disappointment. I had to learn the difference between someone feeling disappointed *FOR* me, rather than being disappointed *IN* me. More than I ever thought possible, the people closest to me were the ones who helped me pick myself up after this devastating blow to my professional career, and who reminded me that there was more to my life than the Army.

My friends acted as sounding boards, and not only listened to my gripes and complaints but also asked me questions and advice about their Army lives and careers. They reminded me that, even though things did not work out how I imagined or hoped they would, I still had a lot to give.

Finally, I used therapy to help me through this process. I needed someone with whom I

could speak about the insecurities I felt within my family and within the Army. Through therapy, I learned how to process and grow from failure.

At some point, we all leave the Army, and it is almost never on our own terms. I take solace in the fact that I will be able to leave the Army with a stronger support system of family and friends than I ever realized I had. Whatever your personal support system is - family, church, friends, etc. - cultivate those relationships, and use them to focus on what's really important in your life.

### ***Focus on responsibility... not fault or blame.***

With very few exceptions, failure is a team sport. Yes, there were extenuating circumstances that led to your non-promotion. Yes, there were things that your Rater or Senior Rater probably should have done to help you out more. And yes, a good portion of the blame lies with you as well. But here's the thing: it doesn't matter anymore.

You are where you are. You can complain and stew about it all day, but at the end of the day, it doesn't matter who you blame for your circumstances. What matters is taking responsibility for where you go from here. Maybe you're on a "bubble," and you have a chance at getting promoted above the zone. If that's the case, then do all you can to make that happen.

Then again, maybe you are a terminal Major. That's ok too. Although your military life may not come to the ending you wished for, you still have the rest of your life to plan and live. Put the blaming and bitterness behind you, and focus instead on what's ahead.

### ***Focus on the future.***

Whether it happens in the next two weeks or in the next twenty years, we're all going to leave the Army at some point. If you've been non-selected for promotion, take some time to get through the pain and frustration that comes with that feeling of failure... and then move on.

We all have a lot more to give: to our families, to our profession, and to the world. Now that your Army career is ending, take a long look at what is most important to you professionally, and use your time left in the Army to focus on that. As an Engineer, I have used the last two years since my non-selection to earn my Professional Engineer license and my Project Management Professional certification so that I can transition my military experiences into a career in project management. For you, it may be that you want to earn an MBA, or learn

to be a chef, or some other career.

There are other worlds than this. Go find your next one, and use your successes and failures to make it the best it can possibly be.

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