



by Cody Anderson

What's in a name? More specifically, a first name?

As every new recruit in the military learns, the answer is - apparently nothing. Your first name no longer matters. Instead, you are referred to by your last name from the moment you get off the bus at basic training reception.

First names become an administrative requirement to aid in sorting your data and are spoken by drill sergeants only for the rare few that share last names with other platoon members. Even then, the first name is just a qualifier said with no personal touch. Drill sergeants announce first names only after stating the last name and pronouncing the word

'comma.' This differentiated Jones 'comma' Aaron, from Jones 'comma' Thomas. For me, this loss of first name was a reincarnation to a different life.

This article intends to celebrate that life as it nears death, explore resistance to change, and embrace what appears to be at least one more re-birth.

Becoming Anderson

"Cody" was a less-than-average citizen at the time I joined the military. My high school GPA was too poor for college acceptance, and run-ins with law enforcement were increasing. Nevertheless, enlisting changed my life, and with it came the building of a new identity.

Last names took a while to get used to, but by the end of my 16 weeks of basic and advanced training, the use of last names became second nature. The identity stripping experience that happens in basic training is remarkable. Your first name, dress code, and hairstyle are the three most personal items taken from you. At first, you feel a bit lost (at least I did), barely able to recognize your bald uniformed reflection in the mirror. It is even harder to distinguish your fellow recruits from one another.

One of the very few unique things about you is your last name sewn on your uniform. You get to know your fellow trainees by last names, and over time, you learn to see the differences amid the sea of bald bodies. By the end, you can quickly identify all classmates by just the back of their heads and the way they walk. At that time, we used ranks among peers very rarely as we were all privates. I was "Anderson" in the Army, and I was inspired to work much harder than "Cody" did the previous 18 years.

Embracing Anderson

I was not perfect, but I built upon my new identity throughout my 3-year enlistment, which

included a promotion to Sergeant “Anderson” and a deployment to Iraq. From there, I got out of the Army to take a second crack at civilian life. At this time, I was better positioned to apply for college and started a degree at my local university. However, it did not take long for “Cody” to become bored as a civilian student, so I joined the National Guard and Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC).

As a cadet and guardsman, I was referred to as “Anderson” once more. This title was further reinforced throughout Basic Officer Leader Course (BOLC), where new lieutenants experienced a similar environment as initial enlisted training. However, there is a big difference between the accomplishments of “Cody” and “Anderson.” In 18 years, “Cody” barely managed to keep himself eligible for enlistment. “Anderson,” on the other hand, accomplished things “Cody” never thought possible by earning a college degree and commissioning as an officer.

Indications of Mortality

It was after BOLC that the first signs of Anderson’s expiration date surfaced. They were few and far between initially, but they became more prevalent after promotion to captain. Peers and senior officers increasingly used first-name references. I found this contrary to the tradition of customs and courtesy so evident throughout my first decade of service. Further, it would have been inappropriate to reciprocate the first name address to your senior leaders. It felt as the rules were being bent from the top down. Many of my peers embraced this new cultural development among the Officer Corps and started to refer to each other by first names. I did not.

Being the oddball/stickler captain had benefits and disadvantages. One benefit was confidence that I would never be at risk of being too informal. Most importantly, it was where I was comfortable operating. The drawbacks were that my aversion to first names sometimes complicated communication and led to estrangement. New peer acquaintances

often jumped to first name reference, and when I explained that I prefer to use last names, I would always get an awkward pause or look.

Initial reactions from my peers made it evident that they sensed a level of smugness or elitism in my naming preference. It often took a while for them to move beyond my stubborn persistence for last names. Overall, I overcame negative first impressions and fostered strong relationships (sometimes true friendships) despite my nonconforming behavior. I don't believe this became a genuinely problematic issue at the captain level. Still, as I approach the conclusion of my captain chapter, I sense it will only get worse and become potentially detrimental.

Things took a drastic turn when I began Intermediate Level Education (ILE). Our instructor clarified that we were to refer to classmates and cadre exclusively by first names to foster a learning environment. As the junior member of the class, I was using first names for officers one and two grades above me.

I was very uncomfortable addressing a lieutenant colonel by his first name as a captain, but it became routine over the coming weeks. During this course, I began the promotion process to major and realized things would never be the same. My post ILE assignment requires first-name reference due to protocol, so Captain Anderson will no longer exist when I return to my branch.

Born Again

At 36, I've spent 18 years as "Cody" followed by 18 as "Anderson." These are only names, but I'm not comfortable with the former quite yet. One lesson "Anderson" taught me is that discomfort is often good because it makes you refocus and pay attention. In my experience, the 'comfortable' soldiers seem to have hit their max potential. Another lesson "Anderson" learned is that many leaders at the next level are willing to help guide you.

It seems proper that I came to this understanding during a course designed to shift leadership perspective. At this point in my career, I assume that most of my future supervisors and peers will refer to me as “Cody” more often than not. It also appears that there is an unwritten professional obligation to refer to peers in kind. As I stand at the crossroads of company and field grade officership, I feel like I aged a decade. I find myself confronted with the finite nature of career and life. “Anderson” had a good run.

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