

Zachary Tripp

Dr. Maxwell

Advanced Composition

4 April 2019

### **From Led to Leader**

Staff Sergeant Mark Vowels II was born in Tampa, Florida, and was raised in Greenville, South Carolina. He is a man who has lived his entire life in service to his nation, to his family, and to every person he mentors. As a child, Staff Sergeant Vowels experienced some traumatic events involving his family and upbringing that caused him to have trouble sleeping, and he preferred not being in the dark. As a result, he found safety in superheroes. He attended a Christian school and felt he had only two options after high school: join the military or continue school at Christian college. Staff Sergeant Vowels knew he wanted to be just like the superheroes he idolized as a child, and the military was the option that would bring him the closest to becoming a real-life superhero. As a teenager, he showed interest in the United States Marine Corps because his sister's friend enlisted in the Marines directly out of high school. He heard from him about the brotherhood and service to others; this was the culture that he craved and sought out.

Staff Sergeant Vowels contacted Marine recruiters while he was still a freshman in high school, and they were eager to recruit him until he revealed his age. He was instructed to come back during his senior year when they could help him enlist. In the meantime, Staff Sergeant Vowels redecorated his room with Marine Corps posters and changed his outlook on life to one that would help him join the Corps. As a senior in high school, Staff Sergeant Vowels joined the Delayed Entry Program (DEP), a program designed to commit candidates ahead of their

eligibility dates. Staff Sergeant Vowels had secured an Infantry Contract, a promise to branch into the Military Occupational Service (MOS) of Infantry upon graduation from recruit training. However, after graduation, he received a phone call informing him that he could either leave for recruit training the next week on a radio operator contract or wait at home and delay enlistment for up to a year. Staff Sergeant Vowels knew his calling was to be a Marine in whatever capacity he could serve his nation. He forwent all post-graduation plans, which included the cancelation of his graduation trip, and left for recruit training to start his career.

Staff Sergeant Vowels went through all of the pain Recruit Training Command brought into his life. "It changed me so much that when I came home, my family through a party for me and I had forgotten how to interact with others casually," he told me. "I went to the corner and started folding and organizing my things." At the end of recruit training, he graduated as one of his platoon's Honor Graduates, which brought a meritorious promotion to Private First Class, the second rank for a man enlisted in the United States Marine Corps.

Staff Sergeant Vowels then went to Marine Corps Base 29 Palms in 29 Palms, California, for his MOS Radio Operator training. While there, he began to build the brotherhood and confidence he craved as a child. MOS school was also a gentle reminder that he had not made it in the fleet yet and helped to drive home the discipline that was developed for him at Recruit Training in Parris Island. After graduating from Radio Operator training, Staff Sergeant Vowels went to his first duty station at Camp Pendleton, California, with 1st Battalion (BN) 11th Marines. He was assigned to a mortar platoon when he first arrived.

He was the only Junior (a Marine below the rank of E-4) Marine, so he went out on every patrol and did all the training that the Non-Commissioned Officers (NCOS: Marines above the level of E-4) didn't want to do. This training included driving the mortars onto Ospreys (tiltrotor

military aircraft with both vertical takeoff and landing and short takeoff and landing capabilities) quickly and being dropped off in a new location unbeknownst to him or the squad.

Upon arrival to this new unknown location, Staff Sergeant Vowels and his team would have very few minutes before they needed to have communications up and ready to receive fire missions. Staff Sergeant Vowels' primary job during this time was to ensure all communications stayed up and to relay all fire missions to the platoon for launching the mortars. These pictures show Staff Sergeant Vowels in front of his platoon's choice aircraft, the Osprey, and with his team in the field. After some time with his platoon in Yuma, Arizona, preparing for deployment, it was time for Staff Sergeant Vowels and his battery to deploy on the 31st MEU (Marine Expeditionary Unit) to be America's ready response force in the Pacific.



While on this deployment, the Marines spent some time at sea making a few port calls for liberty (allotted time away from their daily task) and enjoyment. This MEU then went to the Philippines and trained with the Filipino Marine force. The U.S. Marine Corps specializes in

hand-to-hand combat, while Filipino Marines are expert knife fighters and love to barter with the U.S. Marines for gear in exchange for their knives and knife-fighting skills. Pictured here is Staff



Sergeant Vowels in the Philippines after an intense training session with the Filipino Marines. Upon return from this deployment, Staff Sergeant Vowels asked his high school sweetheart to marry him, the woman he now calls his rock and who has helped him maintain his career in the United States Marine Corps.

Upon return from deployment, Staff Sergeant Vowels was again meritoriously promoted to Sergeant and became the Communications Chief for the battalion's Forward Observers. This photo was taken during his last field operation with a firing battery before assuming his new charge. Staff Sergeant Vowels spent nearly three years as a part of India Battery and described this culminating moment as "bittersweet," for it was one of his last times as an enlisted Marine in the field with men he had trained his MOS. His new assignment was very different from the firing battery but was one of his favorite times in the Marine Corps because he got to work with a lot of the Special Operation Forces (SOF) community and other groups he had not worked with before.



While working at the battalion level, Staff Sergeant Vowels put in his package to become a Drill Instructor and was selected for this honorable position to train the future of the Marine Corps. While in Drill Instructor School, Staff Sergeant Vowels did everything he could to ensure he was a Drill Instructor in the same battalion and company in which he was a recruit. Staff Sergeant Vowels spent one year as a Drill Instructor before suffering an injury while an instructor that sidelined him two years early on his three-year Instructor contract. These are pictures from MCRD Parris Island while Staff Sergeant Vowels was a Drill Instructor.



While Staff Sergeant Vowels was injured, he considered getting out of the United States Marines to spend more time with his wife and child. The love of his life, his wife, Amyjoy, motivated him to stay in and put in a Marine Enlisted Commissioning Education Program (MECEP) package to go to college and become an officer of Marines. Staff Sergeant Vowels was accepted into the MECEP program and went to OCS (Officer Candidate School) to prove he could handle the rigors and responsibilities of being a United States Marine Corps officer. Upon completion of OCS, again graduating as an honor graduate, Staff

Sergeant Vowels reported to The Citadel in Charleston, South Carolina, to earn his degree. He will commission as Second Lieutenant in May of 2020.

While a MECEP, he has accepted the role of being a mentor and is currently training all who will attend Officer Candidate School this summer. Staff Sergeant Vowels and I will commission together thanks to his help in preparing me for the challenges I will face this summer in Quantico, Virginia, at Officer Candidate School. Staff Sergeant Vowels has lived a life of service, and as my mentor he serves as my model for being a servant leader.