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Dr. Maxwell

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Leader First, Operator Second

Lieutenant Colonel Jefferson Panton was born in a small town of 500 people outside Portland, Maine. As a child, hard work was not foreign to him. Raised with seven brothers and sisters on his family's farm, he began doing chores and helping his family at the age of 5. Until he enlisted at the age of 19, he had worked an assortment of jobs from clamming and lobstering to house painting. He had several of his family members serve during WWII, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War, but he was the first to serve a full career in the United States Military. "When I was growing up, I always wanted to travel abroad and see the world. I was one of those kids that was reading *National Geographic*, and at my first opportunity I wanted to travel." He was able to fulfill his dream serving on assignments in Korea, Japan, Australia, Iraq, and countless others.

He explained to me why he had enlisted before going to university: "I was looking to go back to school, but my family didn't have any money, so I decided to enlist and do four years to get the GI bill." During his time as enlisted man, he served in Military Intelligence and graduated from the Defense Language Institute based in California with a 92 average. Specializing in Chinese, the demands of his MOS were academically challenging, which had prepared him well for his future career as an officer.

After serving time as an infantry and mortar platoon leader in Korea, LTC Panton completed Special Forces Assessment and Selection and earned his Green Beret. As the rank of Captain, you are placed as the team leader of a group of enlisted SF. The competitiveness and comradery shared between the members of your team is something LTC Panton continued to appreciate throughout his career. He noted that, on his first assignment as a SF team leader, he and his wife (who was eight months pregnant at the time), landed in Okinawa, Japan, during the middle of a typhoon that had wiped all power in the city. His team new team members were waiting at the airport to receive him. They arranged the hotel, the transportation, provided food, drinks, items for the baby, and had even set up a generator for the hotel so they had power. He and his wife would never forget the effort and care they put forth without ever meeting the two of them.

LTC Panton's experiences in Special Forces demonstrated that relationships and bonds are not built by mediocrity, but by going the extra mile. "Everyone wants to serve in the SF community because the people you serve with, everyone strives to be better, which makes you better. Every time I came to work, I knew it was a competition." LTC Panton also noted that this competition was never a drag or tiresome but something that brought further teamwork and trust within the community. When asked what attributes a leader should display, LTC Panton stated, "As new leader, you need to bring maturity and a sense of good judgement. That is what people wanna see. Reliability and not irresponsibility. If you can't bring anything else to the table, bring those to attributes; it's a choice."

During Basic Training, the Captain in charge of his company who had graduated from West Point was so impressed with his character and abilities that he recommended LTC Panton to attend the prep school that assured his entry into West Point and prepared cadets for the

challenging academics and the physical demands. “I really wanted an overseas assignment, which I was told I couldn’t get. That there was no way. That same day, I got a letter to attend the West Point Prep School which would allow me to travel as an officer.”

When he attended the West Point Prep School, “I got stuck on track and swim, which I had never done. I had only done wrestling in high school, so I had to do corps squad practices on top of the hard classes, which prepared me for West Point. I got in really good shape and learned more time management skills.” West Point had been engaging and an evolutionary four years for LTC Panton, leading to his career as an officer. He utilized all of his time not only to prepare himself but also help, train, and mentor his fellow peers and cadets. Because of his prior time as an enlisted man and being three to four years older than most of his peers, LTC Panton had been given further responsibilities and tasks by his cadet leadership. This began his well-respected reputation as a freshman and through his graduation and commissioning. He woke up earlier and conducted physical training earlier so he could make time for helping others in need. “I truly lead by example and would not haze like other cadets did at the time. I would do what I said I was gonna do, and I would represent, which I think I did really well. My senior year they made me company commander because of my good reputation, which was mostly for helping other people. I was never too busy to help other cadets, which I held with great pride.”

As a junior, LTC Panton had served as a squad leader, in charge of around a dozen freshmen cadets. Three of these freshmen were especially notable to LTC Panton because he had taken special care in mentoring and assisting these three in growing over their years at West Point and becoming the best future officers they could be. The first was Kathy Solomon, who had been struggling with academics and was failing five of her classes. LTC Panton either made sure to tutor her in the subjects he knew or found someone that could. She was an exceptionally

hard worker and with his help, she passed all of her classes and continued to utilize her determination and outstanding work ethic. She would later place and win several national titles in Women's Powerlifting. The second was Jenny Cook, who had a facial tick that caused many to believe she possessed some mental disabilities. After careful examination, LTC Panton found that she had precisely the opposite and possessed an exact photographic memory which could only be accessed by the closing of her eyes. LTC Panton mentored her in order to utilize this ability and to not be ashamed of who she is. She later retired with an impressive resume as a high-ranking officer and even served as the Assistant Secretary of Defense.

Lastly and most notably was Keith Hadis, who had matriculated to West Point with little to no physical capabilities and weighing less than 100 lbs. LTC Panton worked with Keith every night doing physical training until Keith was able to not only pass but max the Army Physical Training Test. Keith gained an exceptional sense of confidence and accomplishment that he would continue to utilize. He later served as a presidential aid to two Presidents, worked in the Pentagon during the 9/11 crisis, and was Delta Forces key logistics officers brought on nearly every mission. "I tell this story because when Keith retired as a full bird, he called me asking to come to his retirement," he explained. "In his retirement remarks, he mentioned me, alongside all these generals and politicians. So here he is getting accolades by all these famous people, and he mentions me saying 'I'd like to thank Jeff Panton because he first recognized me and gave me the confidence to achieve everything I have today.' That is why I tell people it's not always what you do in the military, but how you influence other people. Sometimes it's that impact that you make on other people that is so important." These three individuals could have easily been left to their devices without any mentorship or help. Kathy Solomon could have failed out of West Point; Jenny Cook could have easily been cast out and tormented for her facial tick without any

consideration for her academic abilities; and Keith Hadis could have continued to struggle with self-esteem and fail his physical training tests. The leadership LTC Pantan exemplified as a mere West Point cadet is one of his greatest accomplishments. In his eyes, being able to pull out greatness, strength, and courage from the potential of not only these individuals but countless of his other subordinates and peers throughout his career may even supersede any of his missions and operations as an officer. LTC Pantan carries on these experiences as a TAC (Teach-Advise-Coach) Officer at The Citadel, sharing his wisdom and connecting with cadets, faculty, and staff.