

## Pershing Essay Awards

In 2006, Anne Mudd Cabaniss, the widow of my West Point roommate, Jelks H. Cabaniss, Jr., and I, with the modest help of a few other donors and the approval of the West Point Association of Graduates, proposed to the Commandant of Cadets an endowment for an annual Pershing Essay contest to be participated in by first class cadets.

The essay was to consider this passage from a 1921 letter by General John J. Pershing, commander of the World War I American Expeditionary Force...

*"What the Academy stands for has always been my guide throughout my military career, and to have approached the high ideals of duty, honor, and service to country that are the real spirit of West Point has to me a meaning that nothing else has. The longer I live, the further I have gone in the Service, the more I reverence the things that inspire the heart and soul of young men at West Point."*

... and, reflecting on his or her experience at West Point as graduation approaches, to write an essay that tells what West Point has meant to him or her.

The Commandant of Cadets chose to incorporate this essay into MX400, Officership, as a written requirement for all first class cadets, and to establish medallion prizes (gold, silver, and bronze) for the winning essays — these prizes to be awarded annually at a luncheon attended by those cadets whose essays had been judged a the best in each cadet company.

I have made brief remarks at each luncheon since 2007. Below are my remarks prepared for the luncheon of April 2016.

John H. Cushman

## **Remarks, April 2016**

**Congratulations to you Pershing Award winners. It is a pleasure to be with you again.**

**This is my tenth Pershing Essay awards celebration. Each year has been more difficult. This may be my last time.**

**From years of experience and observation I have some advice for you.**

**Advice 1: When you get out into the Army, establish your standards high. The Army will tell you what high standards are. Don't settle for less.**

**Advice 2: Supervise. Whatever your bailiwick, take it as your solemn duty within that sphere to see that high standards are observed.**

**You have been exposed to six excellent principles of Mission Command: Mutual Trust, Shared Understanding, Clear Commander's Intent, Disciplined Initiative, Mission Orders, and Prudent Risk.**

**If I were in charge of the Army I would add a seventh: Supervision.**

**To supervise is not micromanagement. It is compatible with Mission Command. The fallibilities of human nature demand it.**

**Always supervise, check, inspect. A hands off approach will not suffice.**

**If you google the two words "Cushman Publications" you will bring up a Library of my writings. In Volume 3 of Folder 2 of that library you will find Chapter 17, "Commanding the 2d Brigade, 101st Airborne Division."**

**That chapter tells how, in the heavy fighting after Vietnam's Tet 1968, the twelve rifle companies of my brigade scoured the enemy-infested countryside north of Hue, working with Vietnamese army and province units and maintaining unrelenting pressure on the enemy. When any company made serious contact, brigade immediately assembled from whatever nearby source a force under one battalion commander. That force would surround the enemy, deny all avenues of escape, and, with constant illumination turn night into day. Supported by air**

strikes and artillery, our troops would destroy the enemy or take him prisoner. Such operations became the trademark of the 2d Brigade

In a dozen such actions in the spring of 1968 my 2d Brigade broke the back of the North Vietnamese forces operating around Hue and with our Vietnamese comrades brought peace to the countryside.

This never would have happened without a hands-on approach to battle detail by the brigade commander.

Promoted to brigadier general. I then commanded Fort Devens, MA. There Lieutenant General Jonathan O. Seaman, commanding First Army, signed a recommendation that I be awarded a Distinguished Service Medal. It said...

“Brigadier General Cushman’s... record of improvements in the area of management, stemming directly from his astute leadership, is overwhelming... Through (his) extraordinary ability for accurate assessment, meticulous attention to detail, and boundless personal drive, Fort Devens attained outstanding results... (His) extraordinary management prowess, his efficient utilization of every resource, and his unique rapport with his subordinates has resulted in Fort Devens becoming a model Class I installation...”

Sergeant First Class Michael Lopez, the personnel staff noncommissioned officer with whom I worked in detail to straighten out personnel accounting on post, from the company in formation up, wrote: “Until this day I and others who served with General Cushman do not know how he did all he did at Fort Devens.”

Again, this would not have happened if I had not paid attention to detail.

One day I was in the office of the PMS&T at Harvard University’s ROTC detachment. I dialed the local telephone number that would connect me to the Fort Devens switchboard. I found myself listening to a conversation. It was between the director of the Fort Devens installation supply activity, let’s call him Charlie, and an off-post customer, let’s call him Joe.

Charlie was telling Joe to come in and pick up the typewriters that had been waiting for him on the loading dock. Joe was telling Charlie not to get excited; he would pick them up directly. Charlie said something like, “If you don’t pick them up right away, my general will see

them.” Joe said, “You don’t have a general like that.” To which Charlie replied, “Yes, I do.”

I went down to the loading dock the next day, saw the typewriters, and asked Charlie about them. I did not tell him that I had overheard his conversation.

I tell you these war stories to show you where I’m coming from when I tell you to supervise.

In MX400 you have read each chapter of Jim Fredericks’ “Black Hearts,” his tale of a 2006 atrocity in the 2d Brigade Combat Team of the 101st Airborne Division in Iraq.

That was the same brigade task force, slightly differently organized, that I had commanded in Vietnam some 40 years before.

When I read Frederick’s account I was appalled. I got in touch with him. He told me more of the story. I decided to write a paper on what went wrong. My verdict: lack of supervision.

I wrote a 30 page essay. At your tables are copies. It is a case study of inadequate supervision, at various levels of command. I ask each of you to take a copy with you and read it carefully.

If you think you might some day command at the brigade level, you should especially read that paper. I will say no more.

You can also find that essay in my Library; it is the fifth item in Folder 7. You might take a look at other items in my Library, Folder 2 being a twenty-three chapter Oral History, including many an action that I could and should have done better. Just google “Cushman Publications.”

This old soldier will take pleasure in the thought that someone is benefiting from reading his work. So ends my message to you.

Good luck, and thanks for the opportunity to speak to you.