

John Cross PodCAST Transcript (25:26)

KARA: Hello and welcome to the podcast, a podcast produced by the College of Applied Science and Technology at Illinois State University. I'm your host, Kara Snyder, and I serve as the assistant dean of marketing communications and constituent relations for the College. Each episode, we're sitting down with an alum or friend of the college, and today we have a chance to talk to John cross. John was the professor of the Department of Military Sciences at Illinois State University from August 2016 to may 2019. He retired from the United States Army at the rank of Lieutenant Colonel in September 2019 and now serves with valor a campus ministry focused on ROTC students at Illinois State University and throughout the Great Lakes region. Welcome and thank you for being here.

JOHN: Hey, Kara. I'm so glad to be here today.

KARA: Let's start at the beginning. Tell us what made you interested in joining the army? Why did you become a cadet?

JOHN: So my father and grandfather both served in the military, in the army during their time, and so growing up, you hear the stories of their time in service, and you see things around the house, like my grandfather had a shadow box with a bunch of his memorabilia in it. And so that kind of piqued my interest when I was very young. And then what really piqued my interest, in terms of really looking hard at the military and specifically becoming an officer, was, believe it or not, a ABC mini series called North and South. And so it's a based on the trilogy of books by John Jakes. But it was focused on two young men, one from South Carolina, one from Pennsylvania, and they go to West Point, the Military Academy at West Point, and become fast friends, despite the fact that their families are from two completely different backgrounds, and this is all prior to the Civil War, just the exposure and reading the seeing the mini series, reading the books afterwards, the idea of going to the Military Academy at West Point just really piqued my interest. And so when I was a junior in high school, I began my application process and just continued to push through. After graduating in May of 1989 from high

school in June, I found myself on the banks of the Hudson River as a cadet at West Point and so and then four years after that, surviving all the trials and tribulations that are associated with going to the academy. Graduated in May of 1993, so 31 years ago, and then was commissioned into the Army as a second lieutenant in the infantry branch. What is that? Seven year process they were becoming a... an officer, to include a, you know, being a cadet at the Academy.

KARA: And I just think that's so commendable, because it's so rare for individuals to know what they want to do, to have that kind of conviction at such a young age, and to be a high school junior and set your sights on not only the army, but West Point. Tell us about your experience there.

JOHN: The best way to describe your experience at West Point is the fact that it's a great place to be from. And so the four years there, you know, you sit there and you think about, oh, this is hard, you know, you got very difficult academic life. There's additional requirements in terms of military training, in terms of physical training, you got upperclassmen who are breathing down your neck all the time, especially your freshman year, you have a cadre of officers and non commissioned officers who were there helping you grow and develop and to become the leader that the army needs you to be when you graduate. And like I said, it's it's difficult, but the constellation is, is that so many people have gone before you that it's not input. You know, it's not impossible, because people have done it before. It's just, do you have the grit and determination to make it through and achieve your goal? That transition from civilian to becoming a cadet, and then from going from being from a cadet to an army officer, is one that, you know, you just take an incremental steps. You know, when you when I showed up in June of 1989 and became a cadet, they did not expect me to, you know, be ready to be a lieutenant within a week, which is a good thing, because, you know, it's a four year process of transformation of character, development of education and training that you go through to produce the lieutenants that you know graduated in May of the you know, four years later, and are ready to become officers in the army well.

KARA: And I really appreciate that perspective of it doesn't happen overnight, but also that others have done it before. So, you know, it's not impossible. Thank you for that, because I think that's a really good perspective and a reminder that it's not all about us, right? Sometimes when we're going through those trials, it's easy to think that we're going through it alone. So I appreciate you sharing that perspective.

JOHN: Yeah, and that's one of the things that kind of gets ingrained into you while you're at West Point, is that you're not going through this alone. You've got your classmates who are going through the experience with you, and it really helps. You do realize that you're not just a single person, a single entity or part of a larger team. And the relationships that are formed in those I'll use the term, in those crucibles of fire become stronger, and you can go back years later and reconnect with those individuals and based on those times that you experienced, whether it's at the cadet at the academy or later on in your military career, you just have those bonds of friendship, of, I'll use the term Brotherhood or sisterhood, you know, family bonds that are drawn close because of those times. And yeah, you just realize that those opportunities are really sweet, especially as you get older and later in life, you know, this weekend we'll be able to be able to reconnect with a couple of my classmates while I'm down in Alabama, and then next weekend, while we're out in New York, I'll be able to connect with several other classmates of mine. So yeah, it was just those connections that you make, and when you're going through those times that you realize you're not in it alone. Others have gone before you, and others are going along with you through that process, and so you can draw strength from them, as well as not lean on yourself, and you can give strength to others at the same time.

KARA: Thank you for that advice. I think that's... that's great for cadets to remember and tell us what was it like. Tell us, you have this strong bond with your cadets. You've built this team, and then you transition to being an officer in the army, where you have a team, but it's new. It's different. What was that transition like for you?

JOHN: Yeah, so that transition for me personally was fairly easy, in that when I went to my Basic Officer Leader course down at in Georgia for infantry training, I would

say almost 70% of my class that I was there with were classmates of mine from West Point. So we had a large contingent from West Point in the group that I was with going through that training. And so for me personally, it wasn't in terms of relationships and building a new team. It wasn't all that difficult, because we kind of like the team was already formed, but where we worked diligently toward is pulling in these the ROTC students and the officer candidate school graduates, into the group, so that we could all perform it together as a team. So we had a strong nucleus to begin with, and then we pulled in everyone else so that we could function better as a team, to include the guys from from ROTC, as well as Officer Candidate School, OCS. And then when you get to your first unit, chances are you've got folks from either your My West Point class or my officer leadership course class already located there, or from Ranger School. And again, it goes back to the the trials and tribulations you've gone through, and then reconnecting with people who are already on the ground. And you know, I remember in my company, we had, there were two of us who were West Point classmates. So of the four platoon leaders, two of us were classmates, and then our lieutenant executive officer, so the second command of the company was a year ahead of us from West Point. And so we kind of had those connections already formed. From a military academy graduate perspective, that transition is somewhat easier because of the large group of cohort of officers you're going in with. I think it's a little bit different for ROTC students, just because, while there are many ROTC students who are coming in and graduating and commissioning, and they make up the vast majority of the officer corps, they don't all come from the same school, and so having those school bonds definitely helps. And then when you can reconnect with those who do have school bonds, then it makes your time of service that much sweeter. I reflect back on a couple of years ago. I thought Colorado Springs and the Fort Carson Colorado was out there, and I was able to reconnect with several Illinois State cadets who were serving out there at the time. And it was funny because one of the lieutenants, who was commenting on how he had picked up the phone, answered and said, Okay, I got a captain. I'll see okay, yeah, come on over to the office and we'll take care of things. And so when the captain walked in, the lieutenant looked up at him. He's like, Dude, you're a red bird. I remember you when you were a senior. I was a freshman, you know, when those occurrences happen, you know, I know for those two Redbird cadets, it was just a sweet time of connection, and

then I was able to actually link up with them while I was out there, you know, we gathered a whole bunch of Redbird cadets together for dinner one night and just had those bonds that, you know, were formed, you know, in the crucible of Illinois State. And so just to find those times and those times of connection definitely make you know what you go through as a cadet that much sweeter. But I would say for ROTC students, they're fewer and further between than, say, if you're an academy graduate. If that makes sense...

KARA: That makes perfect sense. And I love hearing about, you know, essentially, they're entering into this small world where they can make those connections nationwide just based on the experience they have during college. So that's very exciting. Like you said, it's very sweet. It's very special. So tell me more. Your career history is lengthy and impressive and includes a variety of army assignments, and I would love for you to share some of those with our listeners. What was your favorite assignment?

JOHN: Yeah, each assignment has its unique, obviously, location, you know, duty performance or duty description that you're doing at that time. With each one, there's great days, and with each one, there's some days you'd rather not have. But I would say, overall, my favorite duty assignment was the one place that in the only place I was had gone to twice in my career. So I was fortunate in my military career to never return to the same place, except for Fort Riley, Kansas. And so I had served there as a captain right before I got promoted to Major, and then I got to go back seven years later as a battalion commander, and where I commanded an infantry battalion of 800 soldiers. And so it was sweet for multiple reasons. The first assignment while we were there, it was sweet because it was my daughter we had just about to turn one years old when we moved there, and so seeing her grow and develop the community support that we had while we were there at Fort Riley was magnificent. The towns of Junction City and Manhattan, Kansas were fully supportive of the soldiers who were stationed at Fort Riley. And there's just a sense of community and camaraderie between the post and those two towns that was, I've not seen matched anywhere else, really. And so when the opportunity came to select a post for battalion command, Fort Riley was at the top of our list. And, you know, we were blessed to return to Fort Riley for that very purpose,

you know, and to go back to Fort Riley as a battalion commander, where you're in charge of, you know, 800 soldiers. You know, two two infantry companies, two tank companies. You know, a Ford Support Company, a headquarters company, and opportunity to take those soldiers, get them trained up to deploy in support of the global war on terror. In late 2010 early 2011 to Iraq was just, you know, a wonderful opportunity and just a great time to serve, and you know, and also having a great team of soldiers, of not commissioned officers and officers that were part of that team was made, made that assignment really, really special.

KARA: It must have felt like such a full circle moment for you.

JOHN: Absolutely. Actually, I was out at Fort Riley early last week to be there for the change of command, so the new commander of the battalion that I commanded has just stepped into a role, into that role, and I've reconnected with the battalion over the last several months, and it's just been so great to see the history of the unit being celebrated, and the soldiers are coming to know the history of the unit as well. The regiment that I commanded was formed in 1861 and has been on the active army rolls since that time. And so just there's a lot of history to the to that battalion and to see the soldiers embrace that history is really cool. As I was heading out there, I was chatting with a one of my cadets from West Point, who is just giving up company command at Fort Riley. And I was like, yeah, it was really cool to come back to Fort Riley in 2010 and to see all of the things that were that I had been a part of the planning process of, you know, when I left Fort Riley in 2003- they were PowerPoint deep, you know, plans for new training areas and new training facilities and things like that. And then to come back seven years later and to see them actually in existence, and the soldiers were using them and using them to great effect in terms of their war fighting preparation and combat deployments. It was incredible to see. So yeah, the full circle moment was definitely special to see how everything had worked out in the intervening years between a time I had left in 2003 and the time I had returned in 2010

KARA: And then on the flip side, I have to ask, what do you consider to be your most challenging assignment? And of course, if something's challenging, there's a lesson there, right? So tell us what you would have learned from that experience.

JOHN: So I think my most challenging assignment was when I was serving as a brigade executive officer. And so the way the structure of the Army goes, lieutenants lead platoons, captains, lead companies, lieutenant colonels, lead battalions, and then full colonels lead brigades. And so as the executive officer of a brigade, I was a major in that role capacity, and one of the hard things to do for in that role for me, that I found was getting the battalion executive officers so one level down, but they were still my peers, to understand the brigade commander's vision for the brigade and how each of the battalions were to contribute to that vision and accomplishment of the mission. And I had been a battalion executive officer, which was, I wouldn't say, was easy, but it was easier in that all your subordinate staff is lower ranking than you doesn't have the experience that you have. And so you can sit there and say, Hey, this is what we need to do. Do it. And they say, Roger that. Move out now as a brigade executive officer, now you're working with peers, both on your staff as well as the subordinate battalions. And so they had just the same experience, or almost as much experience, as you, same rank as you. And so now it's more about wielding, not necessarily direct influence, but how do you influence them to see the bigger picture and move together to accomplish the brigade mission, while they're also being directed by their battalion commanders to focus on the battalion mission as well. And so, yeah, it was, it was a very difficult time. It was a very challenging assignment. You know, the the opportunity I had after that position was I got to go to the National Training Center out in California, and which is where the army sends their brigade combat teams to train up. And at the time it was training for their next deployment cycle. And so the role that I had when I first got out there was, I became the coach to those brigade xos, and it wasn't that I was coaching them on, hey, this is what I did. And this worked out great, because my experience was really not that at all. But I was able to leverage my experiences and saying, "Hey, you may not want to consider doing this. Or, Hey, I see it going down this road. I'm going to tell you it's not going to work out. You got to find out a better way, because I tried it myself, and I was a complete and utter and miserable failure at it." So embracing the

challenges those lessons learned that, hey, you got to be able to figure out how to influence your peers, and peer leadership is the hardest form of leadership, I'm firmly convinced, to see the bigger vision and thus accomplish the mission of the higher headquarters, as opposed to being solely myopic and focused and focused strictly on their own individual unit.

KARA: And that actually leads me right into my next question. I know your career has included a variety of leadership roles, and reflecting on that. How would you describe your leadership style?

JOHN: Yeah, I would say that over the years, I've gotten to the point where it changes at each level. You know, as you start off as a platoon leader, you're very much in a direct leadership role. You know, you've got soldiers that are directly underneath you. You know, with as you, as you progress in rank and move up the chain of organizations, your leadership style becomes less and less direct and more and more of a position of influence. And so as a result of that, I would say that my leadership style has grown and developed to the point of being a coach and a mentor. You know, do I have the ability to go down and, you know, apply that direct leadership? Yes. But is that the best way to do things? You know, we joke around that in the military, saying, you know, oh, it's squad leader six. You know, when you got a full colonel walk in the room, and yet, he's applying direct leadership styles that you know, a squad leader would use, and you're just kind of like, you know, served by at this point in time in your life, you should not be this directive in your leadership style. And so, yeah, my leadership style, I would say, would be that that of a coach and a mentor, you know, leveraging my experiences, my life experiences, as well as you know, the things I've learned throughout my years in the military in life in general, is to help others see the bigger picture, see the second and third order effects of decisions that they may make, they may not be able to see it, because they're solely focused on what you know, the immediate decision, as opposed to, okay, so if you make that decision, what can potentially be an outcome of that that you're not anticipating. And you know, it's like the ripple effect. How far is this ripple going to go based on this one decision you know, being able to coach others to see those second and thorough effects so that they can make a wiser decision, rather than just a

off the cuff spur of the moment. Nope, this is where we're going. And then, you know, when they run into a wall, wonder why they've run into a wall.

KARA: And I imagine that you know, along with developing your own leadership style, you've had the opportunity to see a variety of leadership styles from others, both above you and around you. What is one quality that you have seen in a leader that you admired?

JOHN: I think one of the qualities that I've seen in a couple of leaders that I've had the opportunity to work with work for is a focus on character development. You know, we talk about character development in the army as being a foundational need for leaders in the army. We need to be leaders of character. But that again, West Point, ROTC, you know, you go through a four year experience, or, you know, some, in some cases, a two year experience with ROTC, and, you know, to develop the character that we need in our leaders. So it's one of those things that doesn't happen overnight. And really, character development doesn't stop once you pin on those gold bars of a second lieutenant, really, throughout your lifetime, not just your time in the army, but throughout your lifetime as well. And so do you have a strong foundation of character development? So I had the opportunity to, you know, work when I was a company commander and when I was a battalion commander, the my brigade commanders were both very focused on character development. And you know, not only for the soldiers and the junior leaders, but you know, even their, you know, closest subordinates. And so I remember sitting in the office of my brigade commander when I was a company commander one day, and one of his majors walked in, you know, ad in hand, saying, sir, I am so sorry we screwed something up. Commander looked in, it's like, okay, so when we screw up, he's like, we were supposed to have a a speaker at this graduation exercise today. It was, you know, our tasking, and I missed the tasking, and I remember brigade commander looking at the major saying, you know, hey, don't worry about it. I'll call the Chief of Staff, let him know that we, we screwed up, you know. And I'll take, I'll take responsibility for it. Obviously, the graduation ceremony went it happened. You're finding out about it after the fact, you know, somebody stepped into the role. You know, we've done so many great things that, you know, in this case, I don't want to take a buy,

but, you know, we'll take the, take the fallout for it. And so seeing, seeing a, you know, your your brigade commander, this full colonel who is willing to go to the, you know, Division Chief of Staff and say, Yeah, we screwed this one up, and we won't let it happen again, you know, and take that onus upon himself is something that always stuck, stuck out of my mind, and something that I was like, you know, hey, you know, it's like the old sign that sat on President Truman's desk, you know, the buck stops here, you know. So do you blame someone else, or do you accept the responsibility for your unit's actions? And so that was a great example of that. And then, when I was a battalion commander, my brigade commander was just so key and focused on providing the, not only the character development realm, providing that guidance and influence, but also shielding the battalion and lower commanders, the units below the brigade, from external influences that could adversely impact The performance of our organization. And so, you know, I thought that was a great lesson in terms of character as well. Not only are you there to cover for your subordinates, but you're also there to protect your subordinates from adverse influences from outside of the organization. And so, you know, those are the couple of the key things that I would say that I had learned. That I admired in those two gentlemen.

KARA: Absolutely. And I bet that's something that those cadets never forgot. You know, you it tends to stick with you when you make a mistake of that magnitude, but to have a leader handle it that gracefully. Hopefully, that's a lesson that stuck with them and they took to their future careers as well.

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KARA: Well, we are going to finish with a speed round. So just go with your first instinct on these questions, okay, what is the most important part of your morning routine?

JOHN: I would say my morning devotions and coffee.

KARA: Both important. I love it. What are you reading or listening to right now? Anything we should add to our list?

JOHN: So right now, with all the driving I do for my job, I am big into audio books, but the audiobooks I like to listen to are fiction. So book series is that I'm listening to right now is, one is by William Kent Krueger, called the cork O'Connor series, and then the other one is the gray Man series by Mark Greenie.

KARA: Nice. And do you consider yourself? Are you drawn to Salty or sweet?

JOHN: I got a sweet tooth like no one believes.

KARA: If you have a free Saturday, how are you spending it?

JOHN: I'm gonna be spending it with my wife, and we'll probably be working in the yard well, and hopefully with some gorgeous weather to boot.

KARA: Yes, yes, indeed. All right, I'm curious. I know you're not technically an alum. I consider you, you know, obviously, a very good friend of the college, but kind of an adopted alum, in a sense. And I ask everybody Avantis gondola or pub two cheese balls?

JOHN: You know, I think I'm going to combine the two and go with a Reggie's calzone from DP doe.

KARA: I love it. I love it. It's creative and it's delicious. One last question for you. If you could give one piece of advice to a college student, what would you say?

JOHN: I would say to a college student: take it one day at a time. All too often we're expected to make decisions before you even go to college, what are you going to major in? And so take it one day at a time, and you may find out that your initial desire or your what you think you want to major in isn't the right thing for you. So be willing to change. Don't be afraid of failure. You know, that's how we best learn. If you see

somebody who is successful at everything they put their hand to they're probably the luckiest person on earth, and when failure does come their way, they're going to be probably the most distraught person you'll ever see, because they've never experienced failure. So not that we want to intentionally fail. We want to do our best at all times, but understand that. That you know failure is an opportunity to learn, is an opportunity to grow and an opportunity to become the better version of yourself.

KARA: That is great advice. Thank you for that, and thanks again for being here that was Lieutenant Colonel retired John Cross Join us next time on the podcast for more stories from our cast, alumni and friends.