

A 2002 Rhodes Scholar and the valedictorian of her West Point class, Erica Watson Borggren served on active duty as an Army Medical Service Corps officer for 6½ years before transferring to the Army Reserve in late 2009. Her last assignment in the Army was as a speechwriter for General David H. Petraeus, current commander of the United States Central Command. Now a Chicagoan, she is currently an at-home mother and an independent strategic communications consultant for General Petraeus and others.

From Pointe Shoes to Combat Boots: Finding My Feet as a Woman Leader

Erica Watson Borggren

There is a saying in the military, one I learned in the very early days of Cadet Basic Training during my freshman year at West Point: “False motivation is better than no motivation.” We cadets were taught to live out this maxim at every turn. In the rain, entire companies would be prompted to shout in unison, “If it ain’t rainin’, we ain’t training!!” In the face of an unpleasant task – say, jumping into a mud-filled trench in the middle of an obstacle course, “I love the mud!!” And, at the prospect of standing at attention on a parade field for two hours, “I love drill! It motivates me to the depths of my soul!!”

I used to roll my eyes at all this; it sure felt like false motivation at the time, and what was the good of that? Now, though, I see the truth represented in it: pretend, and you believe. On a larger scale – not in a moment but over time – *act*, and you *become*. It’s how I found my footing as a woman leader in the military. You convince yourself. You become.

A Fish Out of Water

Though it’s a vast oversimplification, I’ve often laughed to my Army friends that I was raised on purple and ribbons, piano and ballet. Prior to the recruitment phone call I received from West Point’s women’s tennis coach during my senior year in high school, I had never heard of West Point. Following that call, I visited there briefly, staying with a tennis team member and becoming enamored with the values of the institution, the common and noble purpose of its cadets, and the challenge it represented. Even when I arrived at West Point as a cadet after my high school graduation, though, I still did not know the difference between a commissioned officer and an enlisted soldier. I was 17, had never been away from home, and claimed my mom as my best friend. I was a fish out of water in more ways than I cared to count.

Even after I grew accustomed to Army lingo, being in uniform, and the military culture, I had plenty of disorienting moments at West Point. I remember, for instance, during my junior year having to repress the urge to dance in the wood-floored, barre-perimetered studio in which I learned methods to slash an enemy’s carotid artery with a field knife. I’d just shake it off in those moments, laughing at myself as I tried to refocus on the task at hand.

Less laughable, though, was my sense that I was too soft-spoken, too feminine to do the Army leadership thing. It was an intermittent sense, one I rarely felt during the academic years, when I excelled in the classroom and the more mundane aspects of cadetship, like keeping shoes polished. During the summers, though, when most of the military training and activities took place, it was a near constant doubt. Or perhaps it's this: in West Point's very masculine culture, I was constantly aware that I was "a female," in ever-technical military-speak – and during the summers, in the more military environments, that basic fact seemed even more problematic, less ignorable, than usual.

My unease was at least partially a result of what I saw around me at West Point. We were told that there were many valid leadership styles, but I felt like I saw only one: comfortably authoritative, overtly – bordering on cockily – confident, and full of crisp, measured edicts and pronouncements. It seemed those cadets selected for high-visibility leadership positions were all what we commonly understood to be "huah:" some combination of tough, loud, and mud-loving. They assumed a demeanor I still think of as Patton-esque and employed a louder, at times harsher, style that I could ever see myself using.

Understandably, then, I had my doubts as I graduated West Point. In many ways, I knew I was well equipped to excel as an Army officer. I had found, during my cadet years, that I was physically tougher and mentally stronger than I ever would have guessed. I had learned a tremendous amount in the classroom and was confident in my ability to wrap my mind around complex problems. I was grounded in important tenets of leadership, from servant leadership to leading by example, and had had some opportunities to practice leadership. Despite all this, I doubted my ability to be like the Army leaders I'd seen – and thus my ability to be a good officer. I assumed I'd feel as much a fish out of water in the Army as I did at West Point.

Wading In

These concerns were put on hold for two years during my Oxford days. There, I read Comparative Social Policy and then Theology, all the while enjoying *not* noticing my femininity for the first time in my adult life. I lived the life at Oxford that I imagine I'd have had at a "normal" undergraduate institution, studying at coffee shops, playing on the lawn tennis team, and dancing ballet six times per week. My experience there was in some ways a salve, an escape from the discomfort I'd felt at West Point. So after coming down from Oxford, I approached my re-integration into the Army with some trepidation. Certainly the abrupt transition from being a grad student at Oxford to being a platoon member at officer training at Ft. Sam Houston, Texas involved some cultural adjustment. But upon reaching my first duty assignment at Yongsan Army Garrison in Seoul, Korea, I found, surprisingly, that my fears were in some ways assuaged.

My first position was as an Executive Officer, the second-in-command, of a medical headquarters company. That role involved managing systems and working *with* people rather than *leading*

masses of people from the front of a formation, the latter of which is the realm of platoon leaders and company commanders. Excelling at the former gave me a lot of confidence in my abilities as an Army officer. I discovered that management competence and caring about people as people – regardless of style – go a long way. I did not have to assume any artificial demeanor or style to overcome the fact of my femaleness. I was in a place where quiet, persuasive leadership was perfectly effective and in which being competent, industrious, and personable earned me a lot of respect.

Finding My Feet

There are settings, though, in which aspects of the Patton-esque demeanor are necessary. Nearly one-and-a-half years after arriving in Korea, as I prepared to take command of a medical company in a Combat Support Hospital, I was very aware that company command requires “playing the part” to a certain extent. The basic requirements for a company commander, of course, are leadership and management ability and a heart for people. However, consciously or not, those “in the ranks” expect certain characteristics in a company commander, including a supremely confident demeanor and an aura of authority. While I had gained a lot of confidence from proving my competence, I was uncomfortable with authoritative leadership and the demeanor that accompanies it. Here, then, was the question I’d postponed answering since graduating: how does one whose natural leadership is deliberative and persuasive wield authority? Could I assume that confident, authoritative demeanor and still be authentic?

At first, I was nervous before formations in which I talked to my soldiers and intimidated by situations in which I had to “dress down” a delinquent trooper. Despite being uncomfortable, though, I didn’t have a choice. I had to act the part and assume a much more confident, directive attitude than was natural for me. Initially, like the false motivation we learned to practice at West Point, it felt like pretending or acting. I would close the door to my office before formation times and do a run through of items I needed to address, practicing the bodily stillness that conveyed authority. I would work to assume an amplified, easily confident tone as I spoke to soldiers, even informally. And, though I was seated and the soldier being charged would never have known it, I literally shook in my boots during the first military justice system hearing I held.

Over time, though, all the assumed confidence and authority began to feel more natural. I became more comfortable with giving directives, with speaking authoritatively in front of company formations, and with being generally self-assured. In short, I grew into the role, finding a way to have – instead of fake – the presence of a company commander. I realized the cycle was complete at the one year mark of company command when my First Sergeant, a man with over 20 years of experience in the military and whom I admired greatly, noted to me with pride after a military justice hearing that I was “the salty old commander now, Ma’am.” He sensed the difference. *Act, and you become.*

For all the faked-turned-actual authoritativeness and swagger, though, I don't feel I ever lost my femininity or sense of self. I simply discovered one can be both feminine and confident, both soft-spoken and authoritative. I learned to carry and leverage the authority of a position, complementing my natural leadership style when necessary with the ability to be directive and authoritative. I smiled my way through most of my days and was generally a personable, come-alongside-and-make-you-want-to-help-me kind of leader. And I was naturally conversational and friendly, even gently ribbing, during the delivery of corrections or orders. But I knew how to switch all that off when required and still feel authentic.

Indeed, aspects of my natural style actually did continue to work very well in company command. Because my unit was a medical company, many of those whom I commanded were senior physicians who outranked me; in that kind of setting, the traditional military authoritative style of leadership does not hold as much promise as persuasive leadership, as leading a group from within by power of personality, competence, and persuasion. The latter came easily to me. Rather than just emailing out requirements en masse, I walked through the hospital, demonstrated my genuine interest in the docs' medical roles, and sympathized with them about how the combat mission competed with their peacetime healthcare mission. I came *to* them for help rather than *at* them with demands, and in the end made them want to help me. The senior officers in my company may never have grown fond of receiving orders, but they began to fulfill more of the requirements that had previously been ignored.

It was confidence inspiring to discover, midway through company command, that I was completely comfortable in my own boots, equally at ease with friendly smiles in the hallways, joshing banter with passing non-commissioned officers, and firm on-the-spot corrections of wayward soldiers.

Amphibious

It may still be that I am most comfortable coming alongside my colleagues in a cooperative setting rather than a directive one – I think of it as being like a natural swimmer, who belongs in water, swimming with others. This land thing is okay, though, as I've discovered I have feet to use when I need them. And they're *my* feet – it's my style, not just someone else's which I assume. *Act, and you become.*

Remnants of the confidence and presence I cultivated as company commander are always with me now. That has served me well even when I'm back in a fluid, collaborative setting, in the water again, if you will – as when, during my days writing speeches for General Petraeus in Baghdad and then in Tampa, I would look around and notice I was only female in uniform or person under 40 in the room and be grateful for the authority I learned in command. I am more than happy to swim in these settings, wielding only competence and a personable quality. But it's

comforting to know that I'm not totally unlike all the men in uniform around me. They're *my* feet, but when it comes to hanging with the runners, they'll work.