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COMM 413

## **From Rags to Riches: The Life of Isaac Ragusa III**



The life of Command Sergeant Major Isaac Ragusa is not one that many people know. To cadets at The Citadel, CSM Ragusa is your typical Army Sergeant Major: loud and energetic, he follows the rules and doesn't talk much about his past. While many at The Citadel see the positive impact he makes on campus, few know the story that made him who he is today.

Isaac Ragusa was raised in Eagleville, Pennsylvania, by his single mother. By age 14, Isaac and his mother had a falling out. He left the trailer they lived in and became homeless. He told me he fit everything he owned "in a gym bag." When his karate instructor realized Isaac was homeless, he took him and his gym bag in, letting him live in the Dojo. Plagued by the concerns for security and stability, Isaac knew that when he was 18, he would "have to get out in the world" and make his own way. He told himself, "I gotta do something ... something cool and something to get outside of Philadelphia."

During his Junior year of High School, Isaac knew going to college was not his path. He didn't have the money for tuition and knew no one else was going to pay for him. Even though he was attending Trade School to become an electrician, Isaac didn't want to be an electrician his whole life. He knew he "wanted to solidify a job" of a different line of work that he would have when he graduated. Isaac needed a guaranteed "yes you've got a job, and you've got a place" to live. While watching the movie *Rambo*, Isaac saw "how important Rambo was, but how he wasn't important back in the United States after Vietnam." Isaac thought to himself, "Man, I want to be that guy; that guy's cool." Knowing the guarantee of the military, Isaac thought, "they're gonna clothe me and feed me too... that's too easy."

Originally, Isaac wanted to enlist in the Marine Corps. Growing up, he had always seen the Marine Corps' commercials and thought "they have the coolest looking uniforms. I wanna go there; I want the cool uniform and the cool commercials." Isaac knew he didn't want to go to the Navy, living by a motto of "enter the ocean, enter the food chain." When he went to the recruiting station he was told "the Marine Corps didn't want to take anyone before their Junior or Senior year." He said, "that's not good enough, I need a job," and was pulled into the Army recruiters office and showed videos of the Army. The recruiters said that Isaac could do anything he wanted depending on his ASVAB (Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery) scores. Isaac could tell that he would have many options and opportunities in the Army, stating that "every job available in the military is available in the Army."

After taking the ASVAB, Isaac told his recruiter he wanted to be a Drill Sergeant and "march people around" but was informed he'd have to make Sergeant in order to get that job. His next request was for Military Police, but he was just under the height requirement. Feeling frustrated, Isaac said "just give me anything... I'll go Infantry." When then asked if he would

like Airborne as well, Isaac jumped at the opportunity and agreed to go Airborne Infantry. When returning from MEPS (Military Entrance Processing Stations), Isaac was asked by many people at the Recruiting Station what he branched. When he responded with “unassigned Airborne Infantry,” people started “shaking his hand” like he was a “Rockstar”. This prompted Isaac to think to himself, “Wow, what did I get myself into.” A year later, Isaac went to Fort Benning, Georgia, for Basic Training and became a PVT in the United States Army.



CSM Ragusa learned a valuable lesson early on in his career: “Put in 110%, and the Army will put 110% out.” He also learned that meeting the base expectations of the Army is rather easy; all one needs to do to is “be at the proper place, at the proper time, in the proper uniform, and you can survive.” He made it from E1 to CSM by starting with this idea. “I’m a product of that,” he told me. Being enlisted infantry, he learned that “whatever you do, be good at it because everyone around you depends on you for that.” He was always the person to volunteer, no matter what, where, or when. He attributes his slot at Ranger school to the fact that no one else was willing to go in the heat of the summer – “the only reason I got a slot was

because no one else wanted to go.” He looks back on Ranger School as “a field trip.” His mentality was to “roll your dice every day and at the end of the day you see if you’re still here.”

When discussing hardships through his career, CSM Ragusa discussed the idea of being faced with two situations – one bad and the other worse. He said that sometimes you are going to have to make the bad decision because “the worst decision is not making a decision.” Looking back on his career, he said that the hardest part was balance. The question that he has grappled with is: “How do you balance family with your military profession?” He said that being in the Army is a profession, not a job: “If it was a job, you could tell the job, ‘Hey, I’m taking off today.’ In the Army, you don’t get off.” He also told me that “what a makes a great soldier doesn’t necessarily make a great husband or father.” Throughout his career, his family has supported and followed him through every promotion, deployment, and move. He admits “the family sacrifices a lot” because at the end of the day “Uncle Sam owns you and calls on you to do a lot.” Family has to “take a backseat to a lot of things and understand that,” but sometimes “the Army has to take a backseat.” His lesson here was “Duty first; family always.”

CSM Ragusa’s most rewarding accomplishment is that he can say to this day that “every single soldier” whom he has commanded in combat has been “brought home alive.” He attributes

this to giving his soldiers 110% because, in his words, “you owe them that.” He always ensured that every plan was rehearsed and prepared,



explaining his preparation mentality as “every T crossed, every I dotted.” In respect to war, he told me, you have to “be a stickler about standards.” CSM Ragusa is a firm believer that it isn’t

about him, but about the people around him. The medals are nice and look pretty, but it isn't about those. It's about the people next to you every day: "At the end of the day you're just a man, and you've got to look yourself in the mirror and shave every single day, and you've got to like who you see." He went on to say that although he "might've been hard," he was "fair" and the reason he does what he does is because he likes "to invest in America's future." His goal is to positively influence his soldiers or cadets and make an impact in their lives so that they can look back one day and say, "I remember that conversation."

As a leader, he has always thought it important to "know the jobs under you," explaining that it is "important to me to know what the cook did or what the COMO guy did or what INTEL did." As a First Sergeant and Sergeant Major, he has



learned to drive and shoot Bradleys and tanks to better understand everyone's jobs. This was so he could "be smart about" planning and executing operations. CSM Ragusa finds value in seeing "the world through their [his soldiers'] lenses."

When discussing his role as the Command Sergeant Major of the United States Army Marksmanship Unit, CSM Ragusa reflects back on how it was the first time he "was not the subject matter expert." He remembers feeling like "the visitor for two years" and being "the worst shooter." This was new territory since in all of his past units he had been one of the best, being able to shoot "expert" on any weapons system in the Infantry. Remembering this sudden shift, he said, "I went from being one of the best shooters in an Infantry Battalion to probably

being the worst shooter, other than the maintenance guy who mows the grass, in the entire unit.” This was a learning curve, and he overcame his lack of experience and knowledge of this type of shooting by first posing the question, “How do I advise them on shooting, or their skill, not being the expert?” He found the first, and most effective, step to be ensuring “they had the best gear and equipment”. He ensured “they had what they needed” to do their job and do it well. This experience taught him that nobody expected him as the Sergeant Major to be the best – “I may not be first. I darn sure ain’t gonna be last, but I’m gonna be here.” When interacting with PVT Katie Harris, a competitive shooter in the Army, CSM Ragusa questioned the idea of letting a Private First Class travel with Army weapons to a competition alone. He was reassured by his Commander, Lt Col. Bret Tecklenburg, who said, “If we can’t trust her to do that, we hired the wrong person.” This showed him how much trust he needed to give those under him to do their



jobs. This new way of thinking, training, and taking care of his soldiers “was so different than normal, but so fulfilling” and so fulfilling to know he was “part of that.”

While he has never modeled himself after one individual, CSM Ragusa likes to model himself on leadership strengths of those around him. CSM Ragusa’s leadership is a puzzle of all the “bits and pieces of positive

things from different people” he has experienced. As a Private, Sergeant Fry was someone that CSM Ragusa looked to both as a Sergeant and a Ranger. Staff Sergeant Champagne was his

Ranger instructor and was the “only reason” he wanted to be a Ranger. As a Sergeant Major, CSM Brian Meyers inspired him by showing him who he wanted to be as a senior leader. CSM Tom Capel, former CSM of the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne, displayed who he wanted to be as a Sergeant Major.



His final year serving the Army, CSM Ragusa was the Sergeant Major of The Citadel’s Army ROTC Department. When it was time to retire, he found himself out in the field with his cadets. He continued training them until his last day, reflecting on the 12-mile road march he conducted with them the night prior to his retirement. “The day before I signed out of the Army,



I did a 12-mile road march with the cadets in less than three hours with a 40-lb pack.” Upon finishing the march, he dropped his pack in the truck, drove with his wife to the hotel, woke up the next day, and turned in his retirement paperwork. A week prior he had conducted Physical Fitness tests with the Cadets and scored a 292 out of 300, stating, “I wanted to get out of the Army like that, I wanted to work until the last day.” Satisfied, he hung up his uniform and retired leaving no regrets.

Retirement lasted roughly a month, as he was soon offered the position of 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion



TAC NCO at The Citadel. After working his entire life, CSM Ragusa wasn't the kind of person that could just close up shop. He needed something to keep him busy that he enjoyed, so when asked if he would take the job, his thought process was easy, "Cadets... I like cadets. They're

motivated, they want to be here, they want to succeed." In transitioning to working for a Military College from the Military, CSM Ragusa had to make some adaptations in how he trained. He decided to focus on the development of cadets as leaders. He believes a huge lesson he has is to "teach people to think, not how to think." CSM Ragusa will pose the end goal to cadets and make them "think through the complex problem." This is because he is more "interested in the process" of how they will get to the end result. This aligns with his philosophy of "there's no right answer... being able to think through the problem is more important than the actual end result."



CSM Ragusa states that the Army has been "a great ride," and he doesn't regret anything he's done in the military. His most proud accomplishment in the military has been "becoming a Command Sergeant Major and going to Sergeant Major's Academy." He goes on to say, "I went into the Army, and the Army has given me everything. It has given me a life. I have traveled, and I have seen and done more things than I could ever imagine. I got a beautiful wife, two little dogs, and a beautiful home. What I have in my garage right now is more than the net worth of

my mom and myself when I was a teenager. The Army has taken care of me... I owe my entire life to what the Army has provided me.”

CSM Ragusa has been a huge impact on cadets at The Citadel and has taught many valuable lessons. He has endured many hard times throughout his life, and his time in the Army has shaped the person that he has become. He is a living example of how the Army can help people. He is also an example of why someone should never give up. Even though he was homeless and couldn't rely on his family, he never gave up on himself. He has proved every person who ever doubted him wrong and has become an



extremely successful person. He has inspired many soldiers throughout his Army career and many cadets during his time at The Citadel. He has shown cadets never to give up on themselves and to always pursue their dreams. CSM Ragusa finished his interview with me and then told me his final quote. In regards to all the hardships he's endured, he says, "You can't let your past determine your future.”