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### **A Call to Soldiering: An Interview with Army First Sergeant (Ret.) James Brower**

There is an apparent gleam in James Brower's eyes when he observes the battalion running efficiently, where the advice he has imparted on cadet leadership is being put to practice. Brower brings a vigor and enthusiasm, not to mention 27 years of active duty service in the US Army, into his new role as the Second Battalion NCO TAC. The role of Battalion TAC NCO was created just this past year to inject a renewed—and much-needed—sense of discipline, order, and esprit de corps in the junior NCO class and the Corps as a whole at The Citadel. James Brower fits that billeting perfectly.

An Army First Sergeant just recently retired from his storied career in the service, Brower reflects a record of qualification and decoration and brings the character and comportsment needed to effectively develop the leadership and the Corps from an NCO perspective. A US Army Ranger with multiple combat deployments, countless airborne parachutist jumps, and experience spanning nearly all levels of command, Brower is more than qualified for his new role, but what he truly brings to the table is character. A family man, a mentor, and always a soldier at heart, James Brower has an enormous wealth of stories, memories, and understanding that any leader can look to for insight and inspiration.

## I Got the Bug in Guantanamo

Born on September 22, 1969, James Merton Brower, Jr., the son of a US Navy sailor, lived his early childhood years through fifth grade traversing the picturesque countryside in a simpler, rural Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. There, playing soldier in the fields as a boy, Brower would recall the monthly exercises where the contingent of Marines would rehearse defending the base in case of an attack. Watching “tanks roll by in your front yard” and “running around acting like we were soldiers as kids” made an indelible impression on the young Navy dependent. Watching those exercises and all of that flawless, awe-inspiring orchestration unfold as a child, Brower recalls, was “the coolest thing I’d ever seen in my life.” It was a powerful influence on Brower’s decision to one day become an infantryman. Later in his adolescence, living in the States, he saw a commercial about the Army Rangers. He knew then “that was what I wanted to do.” Brower would go on to join the Army in 1987, but as Brower reminisces fondly, “I got the bug to be an infantryman in Guantanamo, Cuba.”



*Young James Brower at  
a Cub Scout Boxwood  
Derby.  
Guantanamo Bay,  
Cuba.*

## **We Thought Panama Was a Joke**

“I was scared, but excited,” Brower recalls as he remembers stepping into the entryway for the Fourth Ranger Training Battalion. “I’ll never forget that sign out there that says ‘Not for the weak or fainthearted.’” Brower recalls that on that first day he anxiously glanced up at the sign on the archway to the training center. Passing under this archway would be his first real step towards his destiny, and Brower strode in with the cool confidence that he maintains 27 years later as a retired First Sergeant.

Two years later, on December 20, 1989, the young soldier found himself in the middle of his first of many combat operations, during the political fallout and diplomatic turmoil that became Operation Just Cause in Panama. “We actually thought the alert was a joke,” Brower laughs as he remembers one of his first major combat tests in his career as a Ranger. Far from a joke, however, the reality set in quickly and without hesitation in the minds and expressions of Brower’s trained, elite Ranger Regiment. The likelihood that this was not merely another training exercise that was staged before Christmas was apparent to the men in the back of the plane flying over Panama. “Three minutes after midnight, I exited an aircraft over Panama.” That jump, and the subsequent digestion that this was real, that this was the moment he had been tirelessly training for, was “an eye-opening experience.” His service would continue onward from that rush and wonderment that came with the first jump into a combat zone, as would his affinity for the military, but doubt was beginning to simmer to the surface, as were questions about his professional future and what he wanted from life, as the era of Reagan turned to that of Bush.



*Brower on patrol after conducting combat diver sub-surface infiltration.*

### **Getting That Phone Call**

Brower explained that many in the Special Operations and Special Forces community sensed that General Schwarzkopf was not particularly fond of their units, and more specifically the way they operate, in contrast to other conventional infantry and combat arms units. This, the “Vietnam of [his] generation,” Desert Storm, was not fought with a significant Ranger presence. In fact, only one company of Rangers was activated in the fight against Saddam. Feeling that he had missed his chance at the conflict of the decade and reevaluating his future as a married man and future father, Brower began contemplating leaving the service he so cherished in search of the growth that lies in the unknown. In 1991, Brower left the US Army and excelled in college and in the private sector by harnessing the same leadership and discipline that he had honed to perfection while in the First Battalion of the storied Seventy-Fifth Ranger Regiment. He had graduated with a degree and managed to ascend to leadership and undercover roles in the private

security sector, but he still felt the occasional pangs of emptiness that implored him to search for the fulfillment and drive of something greater than oneself.

In 1993, as the beginnings of a new life and future were falling into place, Brower received a phone call that would change his life. His former platoon sergeant, now First Sergeant Harvey Moore, was aboard a military helicopter that crashed during a routine training exercise. Inside were the commanders of the First and Third Ranger battalions, among other Rangers each with their own narrative and standing in others' hearts and minds. The grip and spiritual impact that Moore's death would have on Brower would prove life-changing. Moore was a friend and mentor to Brower; he was among the three significant mentors he had while coming into his own as an NCO. Sergeant Major Brandon "Duke" Durkin, Brower's squad leader, a Grenada raider, combat diver, and parachutist, but most importantly, a role model for Brower, flooded back into memory. Brower recalls fondly, with the slight betrayal of a smile, the "tough love" that Durkin displayed in training his subordinates and how that shaped Brower's own NCO-style of leadership later in his own career. As did Sergeant Staken, one of Brower's first platoon sergeants, Durkin "forced [Brower] and all of his men to push themselves to their limits." The memories of the leaders and men who had touched Brower's life in a personal and professional way overtook his memory and his consciousness. Being in constant contact with the brothers in arms he had fought alongside, trained, and served with only two years earlier, Brower mourned Moore's death, but he did so with a registered acceptance and a newfound sense of purpose. He knew where he truly belonged, and that was back with the US Army Seventy-Fifth Ranger Regiment.



### Leadership Can Be Unforgiving

Upon his return to service, Brower was not allowed to merely matriculate back into the Ranger Regiment he had always called home. Instead, he was sent for a brief period up to Fort Drum, New York, to serve in the Tenth Mountain Division. At the time of Brower's service in the Division, Senate Majority Leader Bob Dole was a Tenth Mountain veteran, and subsequently the Tenth Mountain was increasingly attached to the highest profile of task forces and deployments. In this infantry unit, Brower found himself in places like Somalia during Operation Restore Hope. It was not just the deployments and training that were unique to Brower's time in the Tenth; the leadership lessons he observed and studied were unique to this time frame as well.



*Brower training Kurdish forces in Iraq.*

In this unit, Brower began to realize the differences and unique challenges in respect to leadership and training style that the Ranger Regiment could not adequately showcase to him as a younger NCO. "In the Regiment," Brower states, "it is easy to be a leader. You have guys with three or four deployments under their belt, and truly the elite of the infantry community. One guy

moves out, there's a dozen to take his place." In conventional infantry units, not everyone has that same motivation, nor do they have the luxury of selecting from a field of only the best and

brightest the Army has to offer. The leaders Brower saw in the conventional Army had to work with what they had. They catered their leadership style to motivate and empathize with a far wider variety of motivations and personalities while still maintaining discipline and accomplishing a mission.

In a manner similar to his role as an Instructor with the Army ROTC Department from 2015 to 2016 at The Citadel with Army contracted cadets, his newest and current role of Battalion TAC NCO makes him responsible for the training, mentorship, welfare, and discipline of college-aged cadets. His perspective has subsequently changed from his time in the less fluid, more demanding Seventy-Fifth. “Not all cadets will be entering the military upon graduation,” Brower explains, “and you not only have to understand that, but when you approach these kids, you have to come at it from an angle where you ask yourself, ‘What is their motivation, what drives them as an individual to be here, at a military college?’” The leadership lessons Brower learned from his varied time in service and in the private sector all continue to make an impact on the leader he is today, especially given his responsibility in grooming and mentoring a cadet



NCO Corps here at The Citadel.

*Brower speaking at a Change-of-Responsibility ceremony at Fort Benning, Georgia.*

**“I Swear I Wasn’t Sleeping.”**

At one juncture in his career, Brower was stationed at United States Army Africa, a theatre command, in Italy. In a theatre command environment, general officers, colonels, and sergeants major are nearly ubiquitous, and the glaring pressure of paying proper respect and deference to position and rank are exponentially increased. Walking down the steps of the Headquarters one day, Brower spotted in his periphery a Colonel staring at him. Solid as stone. Not a flinch. Not a movement of a muscle. “I notice this Colonel is looking over at me, and I’m starting to get nervous...I begin thinking a ribbon is off, or my nametag is reversed or something, and he approaches me and says ‘Sergeant Brower, I swear I wasn’t sleeping.’” “Now, if you’ve been to Ranger school, you’d know exactly what that means. They’ll [Ranger candidates] fall asleep in places and situations you wouldn’t think to be possible. This Colonel had been one of my students in Bravo Company, and I gave him a spot report for falling asleep!”

The Colonel goes on to tell Brower, “Sergeant Brower, you were an excellent instructor.” After thanking him for what he did as an instructor all those years ago and a brief exchange of pleasantries and conversation, the two men part, but the memory of that encounter never left Brower’s mind. “I corrected him on day one of graded patrols, and graded patrols are usually pretty rough,” Brower reminisces. “The Colonel, and I couldn’t remember him as a student from the hundreds that I had seen go through, told me that I corrected him crossing Red Diamond Road, during the Benning phase. He knew the exact spot and moment I had let him make a mistake, and then we reviewed it and made adjustments.” The pride that Brower exudes from that story is apparent, albeit conveyed in a humble, understated manner that is only revealed by the brief crack of a smile that he allows to slip momentarily. The impact Brower made on this man stuck with him his entire career, up to the point where he was now a high-ranking Colonel

in the Army, but he still remembered with striking clarity Sergeant James Brower and the impact that his leadership and mentoring had on him all these years later.



*Helocast for Rangers in Action demonstration.*

### **Two Commanders-in-Chief**

When asked what impact his wife had in surrogating, supporting, and serving dutifully alongside her husband, Brower's answer is concise and clear: "I call my wife Household 6. She runs the house. She's my Commander-in-Chief." All military families feel the burdens of a loved one being deployed, and Brower's wife and children are no exception; this is true especially when serving in a key leadership role, such as a commander or senior NCO. Brower is sincere and expressive in his undying gratitude to his wife and all she has sacrificed and given of herself for his military career. The bills, the family, the children—more than one human being can bear sometimes—fall on the shoulders of a woman who, while she may appear to transcend her station to heroic heights, is human like everyone else. His wife, Brower continues, served as a key leader and supporter of the Family Readiness Group, a command-sponsored unit organization that connects active and retired service members, their families, and the community

to help families who have a loved one in the military. “She still gets Christmas cards from people from ten years ago who she helped through some extremely difficult times.” Without his rock, his motivation, and his love—his wife—by his side, Brower would not be able to rise every day and put on the uniform that demands so much of him and those he holds dear.

In service to his nation for almost three decades, and now at The Citadel developing a future generation of leaders, First Sergeant James Brower, US Army retired, voices a wide and fascinating array of leadership lessons from those he served under, anecdotal observations from his experiences across the globe, and a passion for patriotism and service that transcends the mere historical accounts that can be found in the pages of books or the reels of documentaries. His story, his service, and his sacrifice will be preserved in the Library of Congress with the Veterans History Project, which will offer wisdom for future generations of leaders, students, soldiers, and statesmen who want to see what resulted from the call he received all those years ago, the call to soldiering.



*Brower on an MFF jump with a stuffed animal for his nephew's school project.*



*Brower on a combat dive, taking the stuffed animal to yet another place for his nephew's class project, "happy."*