

**A Conversation Between First Captain Sean Tice and Jay Graf N1966
October 16, 2009**

Graf: Graf.

Tice: Hello, sir. This is Sean Tice, the Battalion Commander at St. John's Northwestern.

Graf: Sean, how are you?

Tice: I'm doing amazing sir, and may I say thank you once again for all the generous donations you made to help the gym and improve that facility.

Graf: May I say it's my pleasure to be able to do that.

Tice: As listed in the questions I sent to you, what really motivated you to come to Northwestern Military and Naval Academy at first?

Graf: You know that's a recognition that took a while. A recognition that I wasn't really headed anywhere. Sean, I'd say that my confidence in my ability to perform in the classroom had declined. My grades were slipping, and of course with it more confidence. Again I was never in trouble, and certainly not a bad person. I had lots of friends, but academically, and I suppose if you look forward professionally, I wasn't headed anywhere. That just needed to change. You know, I wasn't sure if Northwestern would be able to make that happen. My parents were not going to force me to go, but had been pushing me to consider this as an alternative. I don't know how, but finally recognized on my own that this may just be what I needed, and as it turns out that was the case. I always did well on the athletic field, and in the gym, and started out very well at Northwestern. Of course that gave me... that bolstered my confidence, and some of that confidence I'm sure carried over into the classroom. As you know, we all lead and led regimented lives, while we were in military school, and I think some of that regimentation built study habits. The three years at Northwestern were probably *the* best decision that my parents ever helped me make. I'd say in many ways kind of defining ... a defining moment in my life.

Tice: Very interesting, sir, because I actually also chose, after some motivation from my parents, to attend the Academy after actually going to a summer camp here. Is that how you discovered it, or was it through some sort of interview, campus tour or overnight stay?

Graf: You know, that's a good question, and I'm trying to think of the sequence of events that lead me there. I think...we had made a visit, my parents and I to St. John's, and I am trying to remember how it was that shortly thereafter we wound up at Northwestern. I remember going there with my mother, spending an

afternoon. Then I had a decision to make. But I don't remember, you know, how it came up. I know that I spent the better part of a day there with my mother. I think I also took some entrance examinations. I then decided later that week that I should move forward.

Tice: Thank you, sir. That's really helpful. What are some of your most cherished memories of your time spent at Northwestern?

Graf: You know, I'd say the football, basketball and baseball games, and games that we won that we weren't supposed to, upsets that we produced. Needless to say, graduation was a thrilling event for me. Not because I looked at it as an escape necessarily, but because I'd succeeded. My three years of exemplary academic performance, I'd been accepted to the college of my first choice. It was also somewhat bittersweet because I also knew that I was going to part company with a lot of guys who'd been great friends, and still are. I think that's something that's somewhat unique about the Northwestern experience. At least it was for me. I think it is for everybody. Even if you don't see a classmate for 10 years, and you see him at a reunion or some other event, after about two hours it seems like you just saw them yesterday in terms of how you're able to relate. Even though a lot has happened to each of you that has some impact on who you are, down deep you're still a cadet. So I'd say the comradeship with lots of great friends who will be...who are lifelong friends, athletic events. I suppose, you know, the excitement that reverberated throughout the Academy as we got real close to Christmas break and leaving for 10 days. Those are some things that stand out.

Tice: Alright, sir. Thank you. Also, just to add a little bit more to my piece that I'm writing, what was or what were your options your senior year as far as colleges go because I know they can be very varied? Especially in my class, they are to this day. So what were some of your top five?

Graf: Boy, that's a good question. I'll need to think a minute. I remember Northwestern, Boston University, DePaul in Indiana, which was a smaller liberal arts college. Boy, trying to think, what other did I... I think the University of Michigan and that would have been it. When I was in high school and applying to colleges, it was much different than it is now and much different from what I've been through with my own children, both of whom are college graduates. But we just, we looked in a book that basically had summaries of reputable colleges across the country. I mean there was no Internet. You could send away for some information, which a number of us did, but it certainly wasn't anything in great depth. I don't remember any of my classmates taking a trip to see a school. Now I did that with all my children. In fact, we would go to four or five, and I think in one case six different schools to physically visit the campus and talk to a couple of teachers and take the tour. None of that happened in my day. You made a decision based on what you were able to read, maybe a picture of two, and it was kind of site unseen. I remember going to Boston University, flying from Chicago out there. I'd never been to Boston. But those were the four schools that I applied

to. Each of which had, except for DePaul, had business programs that were challenging. I went on to go to graduate school at Boston University. I was in the service for four years, and then after getting out of the service, went back to graduate school, which I thought I'd never have the opportunity to do. So I applied to schools that had business schools. My undergraduate degree was in economics, but through the school of business.

Tice: Well thank you, sir. I guess moving on to the next question. What events or parades, friends or cadet leadership that you had during your time at Northwestern really stand out to you as the reasons why you, yourself, enjoyed the experience there, or enjoyed, as you said before, the camaraderie and togetherness of the environment?

Graf: I guess I'd probably classify that into maybe three groups of people. Leadership that were on staff at the school that had an impact on me would have been...and these names may not mean much to you Sean, unless you've seen a picture of them on the wall, and I think there probably are some. But there was a tactical officer, Major Lilich, and then a Colonel by the name of McCreary who was a retired Lieutenant Colonel in the Army; two men that I've admired all my life. They were hard on me and I'm so glad that they were. And they were hard on everybody, but in a very consistent, constructive way, and thought us to, you know, do what you say, or I should say, say what you do and then do it, and to be accountable, and not to make excuses for your failure to perform. There was an English teacher who was demanding, Steve Elliott. He was a very good teacher, but was very demanding and stretched us as students. My first year I didn't think we were real strong on student leaders in the senior class. In fact, that was probably the one thing that I disliked more than anything else during my experience, and fortunately was confined to just my first year, was a significant amount of hazing. That stopped my second year when I was a junior thanks to Major Lilich and Colonel McCreary, but really more the cadet leadership that took over that next year who were a conservatively a full step above what had graduated the year before. Some names that would stand out would be a fella by the name of Ramey Danielson who was my Company Commander. The Battalion Commander that year was another stand up guy, Miles Turner. I guess another one would be a fella by the name of Guy Burlingame. And then just friends of mine who I learned from and were just good comrades, and I'm probably leaving a few out.

Tice: Well sir, you've obviously gone through a lot of I guess what we call now RFOs, what I formally knew as TAC Officers, and through some of your professors. I've definitely experienced some of the same things you're saying you have. In your first year obviously you were a new cadet and therefore didn't really have much, I guess, a leadership role. You were told what to do and that's what you did.

Graf: That's right.

Tice: I mean a lot of us experience that same thing, and I've been here for six years now so I have seen quite the gambit of leadership myself from a First Sergeant my first year who looked like the starting linebacker for the Chicago Bears. It could have been that I was only a seventh grader, but he still looked very, very ominous.

Graf: Oh, yeah.

Tice: But, what are some of the leadership traits that you took away from your Northwestern experiences. You maybe grew as a leader and got the chance to experience a leadership position and really what you learned how to work with people and work within the group dynamic. What are some of the things those leadership traits that you've learned that are currently helping or have helped you to reach where you are today?

Graf: I think maybe first and foremost would be to be accountable. I think to some extent a lack of accountability is a growing disease in American culture. People seem to make excuses for everything, but to take responsibility for your mistakes, take responsibility generally. I think that being accountable is an essential ingredient in being a legitimate, credible leader. None of us are perfect and we do make mistakes. We need to be accountable for those and freely admit them. I always found as a leader when I would admit a mistake that I was responsible for in front of others who reported to me or even in front of large groups of people, employees, that it was easier then for them to see their own accountability in mistakes that they made. And if you're not accountable and you don't take responsibility, and you essentially blame your own shortcomings on someone else or something else, you don't learn. If you don't learn you're just not going to be very successful as a leader or very successful even as a skilled individual contributor in some organization, say if you were a scientist or an engineer. But accountability would be number one on the list as a leader in a large business organization its something that I insisted upon, and worked to create an accountable culture. That was always my top priority. People who just couldn't get to being accountable didn't last. I did not have much patience for people who weren't accountable. I've got a lot of time for someone who says I made a mistake—we should have done this, this is how I learned from it, that's just fine. I guess I'd never learned at Northwestern, never asked anybody to do something that you wouldn't do yourself. I always learned at Northwestern and model this as a leader in business, to set an example. Leaders are watched all the time and people who are under your command, to use a military term, are looking at the leader to help them determine how they're going to behave, and how they're going to perform. So if you set a high standard then, you know others will stretch to try to meet that standard. Again, I learned lots of things in business, but I'd say in military school those kind of stand out. Maybe the other would be to take initiative. Make a decision, take initiative, get something done.

Tice: I guess one way I would think of saying that is being proactive in one's own life.

Graf: Yeah.

Tice: Alright, thank you, sir. I mean you've obviously stressed accountability and you know how today's culture and society almost seem more geared toward "it's not my fault," "it's not my job," "it's not my responsibility."

Graf: Yeah.

Tice: And we need to really step back towards the ideology of "it is my fault," "I wasn't ready."

Graf: Yeah.

Tice: "I'm sorry" and really owning up and taking responsibility for yourself, and not only yourself, but those around you once you are a leader.

Graf: Exactly right.

Tice: All right, the next question I have for you is, if you would go back and change anything about the time you spent at Northwestern Military & Naval Academy, would you change anything, or if you would change something, what would it be? My apologies for making you think so deeply.

Graf: No, no, no. I guess by hesitating I'm kind of answering the question.

Tice: Very true.

Graf: You know, there isn't much. As a human being, I think we all have a tendency to remember the good and forget the bad, but I don't remember there being that much bad. I do remember, just as I'm sure you do, when you were a first year, you know, struggling to catch up, struggling to keep up. An awful lot of what is expected of us that first year is very different from what we're used to doing and doing well, so there was certainly some anxiety. I can assure you I had lots of what we used to call "labor detail" after school, or usually because I was an athlete, on weekends, Saturdays and Sundays. Walking off hours that I was assigned because I didn't do something well enough or didn't do it fast enough. You know, I mean it was all an important part of my development. I didn't like being on labor detail and it was certainly an incentive to figure out how it was I could improve and stop getting assigned those hours. No, I cannot think of a bad experience. You know the only thing I point at, and I don't know what I could have done to change it as a first year, was just some of the hazing. Fortunately, I was a little larger than average, and so I can't say I got hazed that much, but I didn't like to see others get hazed or hear about others getting hazed. Again, that was only the first year and then that was ended. No untold memories or anything that I still agonize over, nothing at all. I mean there are always things in life you could, you know, do over if you could go back. To some extent that you even

think about those things that you could do over means, you know, is reinforcement that you won't, given another opportunity in a different situation, you'd do them the way that experience has taught you.

Tice: Thank you, sir, and yes, I have found that sometimes larger cadets maybe are sheltered by their own size and imposition towards others. I would have to most certainly agree with you in the fact that I can't recount a single time where I've truly lost the will to be here.

Graf: Yeah. Nor I during my three years.

Tice: All right, sir, seeing that you're a business man, and I'm hopefully going to be an international business major next year at Georgetown...

Graf: Good for you! That's a great school. Congratulations!

Tice: Yes sir, hopefully. I'll keep my fingers crossed until I hear back from them. Reinvention is a word known the world over by many successful businessmen, especially in our current situation. In your position as a successful businessman, do you think that your experience at Northwestern has helped you accomplish what you have in life? By teaching you to be flexible and courage enough to seek out new opportunities and really reinvent yourself as many people are trying to in today's economy.

Graf: I think reinvention of any kind obviously means creating change, which always comes with uncertainty. Some people just can't get over that. That's not to say that in business situations I wasn't scared half to death a lot of times. I'd have to say in business, if you're in a very competitive business, and particularly if you're a public company, you're kind of always scared. I think to some extent that's healthy. It's a fear that doesn't immobilize you; it's a fear that actually mobilizes you and motives you, but nonetheless, if you're going to be successful you have to conquer that fear; you have to make a decision. In my view that's important. People who work with you and for you expect that of you; to make a call so that the organization can move forward. If you don't have the courage to make decisions because there's always uncertainty associated with a decision, then people are going to start looking over your shoulder or find somebody else in the organization who's capable of making that decision, and you lose your power as a leader. So yes, I'd say reinvention of any kind, even if it's just cultural reinvention or adopting an entirely new business strategy or getting out of some businesses that you don't compete very well within, requires some courage. Business leaders, leaders of any kind who are capable of making tough decisions, don't hesitate to do that are the ones who are going to be successful. The thing is, in my view, and it's an expression or I should say a quote that's often repeated by General Grant, that a bad decision is better than no decision at all. Some people kind of wonder about that, but the bottom line is if you've made a bad decision, more often than not you're going to know it pretty quickly and you'll have time to

correct. At the very least a bad decision that you can correct quickly produces learning that enhances the chance that next time you'll decide on the right course. I think reinvention also requires some salesmanship and the ability of a leader to explain simply and clearly what's in it. In other words, any reinvention requires a lot of change, what's in it for them professionally as well as financially, so that everyone's willing to sign up and put their shoulder to the ore, so to speak. It takes a little time sometimes to produce that; to get alignment in the organization around a big change or a big reinvention. It's worth the investment because then you get solid execution if everybody is committed to it, as opposed to everybody questioning it because they don't really understand what the organization's trying to do.

Tice: Very true. That's definitely something I've learned even in the short few months that I've been Battalion Commander is that you have to make a call and it may not be right now, but eventually you will have to make a call on something.

Graf: Yeah.

Tice: You have to be decisive, and you have to communicate that decision with those around you. And really it may be your final decision, but always include the thoughts, feelings and opinions of your fellow leadership because they can really help you find the best path.

Graf: Oh yeah.

Tice: Many eyes are better than one.

Graf: That's another way of saying it. I know I used to use the expression "all of us are smarter than some of us." I think that's exactly right. The leader needs to recognize those views aren't always necessarily going to converge, even though there are smart people sitting around the table they may have different recommendations. At some point in time a decision needs to be made. When we would be in discussion about something in the board room and there were different points of view, when I heard the same points made the second time by the same people then I knew it was time for a decision.

Tice: Very true. I always like to use the term "guided democracy."

Graf: Yeah.

Tice: I guess the last question I have for you, and then maybe a little side conversation if you have the time later, if you could give any one piece of advice to a current cadet that's, let's say in his senior year, going out into the world, what would it be, or perhaps to a new cadet? It's your choice.

Graf: I guess that advice would be whatever it is that you decide to do, do it because you love doing it. If you love the prospect of being a lawyer or businessman or a professional soldier or whatever it is. You know there's that old expression, if you enjoy, if you really enjoy the work you do, you never really work a day in your life because if you enjoy it you'll throw yourself into it because it doesn't really feel like work. It's something you enjoy doing. I wouldn't do anything just for the money, and frankly, I know others in business who are very good at what they do and they make a very handsome living doing it, but they can't wait to stop doing it. I remember my son when he was young would ask me what do you think this person makes or a basketball coach or somebody he saw on TV, and I always encouraged him to do something, and my other children, do something they enjoy doing. You'll throw yourself into it, you'll be successful and satisfied doing it, and nine times out of 10, the money you'd also like to make will also be there because what you do you do so well. Then I guess maybe just as an add on to that because they're related is pursue whatever it is that you're interested in aggressively. You know, do whatever it takes to do it well. You hear, "well I don't want to get off into politics," but I don't believe, really don't believe in luck, and there's another old expression which I think is absolutely true that luck is defined at the intersection of preparation and opportunity. People who work hard, who drive hard, I mean are prepared to take advantage because 1) they're knowledgeable, they recognize the opportunity, and 2) they work hard and are prepared, they're ready to take advantage of it where those who aren't as aggressive aren't and may not even see the opportunity.

Tice: It's actually really interesting because I spent most of last night during study hours making the final revisions to my college essay, which I wrote about the current economic situation. I'm also studying Chinese here at the Academy.

Graf: Wow!

Tice: The Chinese word for disaster is actually a mixture of two separate words, which is crisis and opportunity. I actually opened my paper with those two symbols and then explained what they meant at the very end. That's what I've learned from not only resources here at the Academy, but from my father and other friends who have graduated from the Academy and gone into businesses. Some of the skills I hope to master before the time I enter the real world, such as the Chinese language and culture, also international business and really being able to work on that global scale and accept the fact that we are a global society, and it's not my way or the highway, it's our way.

Graf: Yeah. A lot of people in this country would like to turn that clock backward and put up all kinds of trade barriers. I mean to some extent, laws and regulations in this country are still far more protectionist than they should be, and our current president isn't giving signals that he's a free trader. I mean, hundreds of billions of people around the county enjoy, around the country and around the world enjoy a much higher standard of living thanks to global trade and open markets. I mean

global trade, I think, probably also does an awful lot to build partnerships as opposed to adversarial relationships. When you do business with someone from another country you begin the process of familiarity. As the business relationship grows you get to know people from another country. Not just as business associates, but as people and what drives them and what's important to them. It helps to facilitate a recognition that while we may come from different countries, fundamentally, you know, we're really not all that different. As a result, shouldn't be that judgmental. I think in terms of peaceful coexistence and cordial international relations broadly; international trade is maybe more for that than almost anything I can think of.

Tice: Wow. Thank you, sir. I guess I really agree with almost every point you've brought up and the fact that we can no longer live in such a single-minded society that's based on consumerism, but rather, I guess to quote John F. Kennedy, "Ask not what your country can do for you, but ask what you can do for your country."

Graf: Yeah.

Tice: It's expanding beyond the borders of our own nation at this point.

Graf: Yeah.

Tice: It is what we can do for the global dynamic and for the dichotomy of the world around us.

Graf: Oh yeah, and pull a lot of people out of poverty and ignorance in the doing of that.

Tice: Yes sir.

Graf: Anything else?

Tice: I feel like I've gained some great knowledge from this conversation. Maybe if I keep you going on a little bit longer, I might get smarter. I know you are a very busy man, so I'll let you get back to your day and thank you, sir.

Graf: I enjoyed the conversation Sean. I want to wish you the best of luck with your college admissions process. I hope Georgetown sends you, and I think if they have any sense they will and I know they do, a letter of acceptance. It's a great university and I happen to love Washington, D.C. It's a great school, and I wish you all the luck in getting in there.

Tice: Thank you, sir.

Graf: Alright. Well listen, have a good weekend. I enjoyed the conversation immensely; just listening to you talk and hearing you think. Not that it needed any restoration,

but it just bolsters my faith in what the Academy does for young people, and still doing what it did for me and for others.

Tice: Thank you, sir, and I truly once again want to thank you for your ongoing support of the Academy, not only in the athletic fields, but also just the Academy and the boys here, and the boys that I hope to represent as well as I can for the remainder of this year. So from all of them, thank you.

Graf: Well you're entirely welcome. Keep up the great work.

Tice: Thank you, sir.

Graf: Alright Sean, have a good day.

Tice: You, too.

Graf: Bye.