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## Mettle Under the Stars

June Forte

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My introduction to general officers took place during my 1977–1980 tour of duty with the Fourth Infantry Division at Fort Carson, Colorado.

At 32, I enlisted in the army because I wanted to finish college faster than the one-class-a-semester schedule I was on. I wanted the Vietnam-era GI Bill. It gave more financial assistance than its soon-to-be replacement. When asked by the recruiters what I'd like to do, I said I wanted to be a photojournalist. When they stopped laughing, they said, "If you want the better GI Bill, there are two jobs available: tank mechanic at Fort Hood, Texas, or cook at Fort Carson,

Colorado." Let me see, that's a choice between Killeen in rural central Texas or Colorado Springs on the eastern slope of the Rocky Mountains? Cooking and skiing won.

I reported to the 179th Aviation Company in August 1977. While in-processing, I slipped over to the public affairs office and never left. Somehow the planets aligned at just the right moment, because the impossible happened. I bluffed my way through a discussion with Major Staples, the Deputy PA. He called the 179th and the Commander let me go. Voilà! I was the photojournalist on the *Mountaineer* newspaper.

After three years in the army and another twenty-two as a civilian with the Department of Defense, I've known many general officers. The three at Fort Carson remain at the top of my list.

With unique personalities, backgrounds and strengths, they shared formidable Vietnam combat experience, and ribbon racks the size of billboards. One rose to command an army, another led the US and Caribbean Allied Forces ground invasion of Grenada, and the third became chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

The first: Major General John Franklin Forrest, Commander of the Fourth Infantry Division. He took his first breath in Texas. Following a history of family service dating back to the Civil War, he graduated West Point in 1949.

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Impressive in bearing, he had a hint of a drawl and a meander to his gait. He fit the prototype of an Old West hero. He met his wife at a West Point dance, fathered ten children, and drove an orange Volkswagen bus over the speed limit often enough to be ticketed by every newly assigned MP on the post.

In the corner of his office stood a flagpole with his red two-star flag. A few historic battle paintings hung on the walls. The expected “I-Love-Me” wall was missing.

The average soldier of the 70s rarely looked forward to talking with me. Vietnam veterans, in particular, were a tough crowd to win over. Most disliked the media, and few could emotionally distinguish between the civilian media and those of us in uniform.

With a master’s degree in journalism, Forrest understood my job better than I did, and patiently taught me his. He was a defender of my new profession. He never discouraged me from covering stories that others didn’t want me to write: domestic abuse, suicide, environmental damage. From the start, I felt comfortable asking him tough questions and he always gave straight answers.

For instance, I made an appointment to interview a sergeant major who insisted we meet at the senior NCO club at 0900. Seemed a little odd to me, but I agreed. Instead of a closed club with staff preparing a lunch buffet, I walked into what sounded like a dive bar filled with double-fisted drinkers. I never imagined I’d see such a callous disregard of on-duty propriety. Although there was an out-of-control substance abuse problem at Fort Carson, no programs were in place to handle it.

Later that day, I stopped at Forrest’s office. “Why are you letting the clubs open at nine o’clock in the morning?”

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“If I close their damn clubs, they’d be downtown. That’s worse trouble. We’re working on it.” True to his word, there was a substance abuse program and a recovery center on base before I left Fort Carson.

Forrest took me to task once. General Bernard Rogers, NATO Supreme Allied Commander visited Fort Carson. During his press briefing, the director of public affairs called on the civilian media first. When my turn came, I was ready. Questions at hand, the broadcasters had their tape recorder on. It moaned to stop just as I asked my first question. I wrote my article from the few notes I scratched on a notecard, and from listening to what the recorder captured before it broke. That article ran in that week’s *Mountaineer*. I wish that was the end of it. The next week, the editor told me, “Forrest wants another article on Rogers.”

“I don’t have any more material.”

“Damn it, June. Just do it.”

Crap, now what? I went to the broadcasters. “Let me listen to that tape again.”

“Ain’t happening. We taped over it.”

I improvised. I reworded material from the first article, mentally stepped into General Rogers’ boots and added what he would have wanted to say, a glowing tribute to the troops. The finished piece went into the editor’s inbox and I went on a few days’ leave. While I was gone, the editor decided to add quote marks around everything General Rogers didn’t say.

Forrest called me. “Nice article on General Rogers in this week’s *Mountaineer*. I don’t recall him saying most of it.”

“Neither do I.” I explained the misunderstanding.

Forrest let it drop. “General Rogers made a point of telling me he reads the *Mountaineer* every week. Let’s hope he thinks he said it.”

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Forrest looked out for me in small ways like reminding me to take off the lens cap on the camera while shooting. And he looked out for me in big ways.

When he learned I was the only one from Public Affairs going to Germany with the 1978 Reforger advance party, he told me, "I want you to remember you work directly for me." He knew I'd need a safety net over there. I was outranked by just about every US and foreign soldier in NATO.

In Germany, I hitched a ride out to a military train depot to take some photos of our troops and heavy equipment arriving for the exercise. I purposely ignored the German "Fotos Verboten" signs. A captain from Fort Lewis, Washington, stepped from the train and made a beeline over to me. "Can't you read the signs?"

"No," I lied.

"Who do you work for?" I'm sure he was hoping for some poor lieutenant or sergeant to chew out. It was the perfect time to say that impressive sentence. "I work directly for Major General John Forrest, Fourth Infantry Division Commander." The captain backed off and rejoined his men at the train.

I dropped Forrest's name often on post. I would tell those ornery Vietnam vets that General Forrest said their story needed to be told. I usually talked with him every week about what I planned to cover. He'd nod. Good enough endorsement for me.

It took me a while to realize he used me too. He'd quiz me on what was going on downrange. "How's it going with the troops?" It became apparent he wanted more information than what he was getting from his circle of horse-holder aides who whitewashed issues into good news. Forrest appreciated my candor.

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After thirty-three years of active duty, Lieutenant General Forrest retired as Deputy Commander-in-Chief, United States Army Europe.

The second general I met at Fort Carson was Brigadier General Jack Brodie Farris. I heard his name taken in vain before I met him. As a colonel, he served as the Fourth Infantry Division's Chief of Staff. I didn't meet him until after he was promoted, moved to a bigger office, and became assistant division commander for support, in charge of logistics, maintenance, and sustainment. He also became the bane of the post. Soldiers dubbed him "Black Jack." That name popped out of mouths right before a complaint. And complaints about him flourished.

Once Farris pinned that star on, he led the entire division on a five-mile run every Friday morning at seven o'clock. Long-limbed and sinewy, he had the body of a distance runner. No one finished the run before him. I'm sure some held back intentionally. To say the troops didn't like Farris would be a gross understatement. Senior NCOs close to retirement mutinied. They jogged as far as the closest coffee shop and hid out. Their mantra: "The army I joined taught me to stand and fight, not run away."

Friday runs continued for a few months. So many soldiers were able to get medical releases that the Friday turnout continued to shrink and eventually ran out of steam.

Around the same time, I did a story on the Senior NCO Combat Training Program, a vigorous two weeks of individual and team combat challenges. They were camped so far downrange that the road petered out. I picked up a three-quarter-ton truck at the motor pool and drove off, relying on a hand-drawn map. It was late afternoon and I planned to spend a good part of the night there. I found them off-road in an obscure area ascending and rappelling the canyon walls.

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I joined the cadre at the top of the canyon. Sitting on a flat stone formation enjoying the waning warmth of the sun, I interviewed them between their calls of encouragement to those who reached the top and those on their descent.

During a lull in the conversation, one of the cadre asked, “Guess who was out here yesterday? General Farris spent the day, unrolled a sleeping bag, and stayed the night. Participated in everything we did.”

A few days later I was in Farris’ office. A true son of the South and a 1958 Citadel Graduate, he hung homage to his alma mater across his office walls. His early military service included company commander with the Eighty-Second Airborne and battalion commander, 173rd Airborne Brigade in Vietnam. That and his stints at the Army Ranger School and the Marine Amphibious Warfare School must have made him feel right at home at the Combat Training Program.

Before we started in on our topic of support sustainability, I mentioned I had been at the Combat Training Camp and heard good things about him. “They’d follow you into hell.”

He responded with a disbelieving, “Yeh, sure,” but seemed pleased with the compliment.

His office on the second floor of the headquarters building overlooked a horseshoe driveway. It was a typical fall Colorado day. The office windows were unscreened and opened wide. We’d just settled down to business when he lifted his index finger and muted me in midsentence. He bolted from his desk to lean out the window and yelled, “Hold that truck.” He ran out of the office.

Curiosity drew me to the window. The driver stood next to the truck at attention. Farris opened the truck hood and crawled onto the engine block. He pulled the dip stick and jumped down. He waved the stick in the driver’s face. “What do you think can happen to you and the

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men you're transporting when a truck runs out of oil in enemy territory?" The driver was speechless. "You and the forty men you're transporting will die, son."

The word "son" brought a level of fatherly concern to his scolding. He cared deeply about his troops. After that, I would have followed him into hell, too.

Lieutenant General Farris led the US and Caribbean Allied military forces' ground invasion of Grenada in 1983.

My third general walked into the Public Affairs Office on a Friday afternoon. Master Sergeant Carl Martin manned the front office. In the back office, I pecked out an article on the manual typewriter.

Carl buzzed the intercom. "There's a general here to see you. I sent him back." Carl knew the generals on base. He'd have said a name if he knew him. How rare is it for a general to show up at an E-4's desk? Apparently without an escort.

I looked down the hall. Sure enough, a brigadier general walked toward me, hand extended. He was over six feet and grinning. "Hi, I'm Colin Powell. I understand you want to interview me."

I recognized his name from rumors circulating that he was a favorite in Washington. At the Fourth, he'd get the next-level command experience he needed to continue his path to the top. I hadn't asked to interview him. His official reported date hadn't been determined. General Forrest had thrown a curve ball at me. Spontaneous interviews were not my thing.

Powell sat on the desk across from me. He would join the Fourth as the Assistant Division Commander for Operations. I asked a few questions about his background and how he felt about his new assignment. It was a casual and cordial conversation. The son of Jamaican



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immigrants, he grew up in the South Bronx. A mediocre student at City College of New York, he found his vocation through ROTC.

I liked him immediately. Whether instinctive or taught, he was a charismatic and skilled communicator. If the room had been crowded, I still would have felt like the only person in it.

I would have liked to have stuck around for his tour with the Fourth Division, but my days at Fort Carson were numbered. I left before he returned.

I met up with him again at the Pentagon when he was named Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in October 1989. Like most successful people, he had gained both passionate supporters and critics. Called “the reluctant warrior,” he advocated diplomacy and containment before military intervention. He believed in inclusive decision-making, often inviting employee stakeholders into meetings.

Each of these men shaped me. Forrest showed me when to buffer rules and policies with compassion and why to enforce them situationally. Because of him, I had the confidence to bend a few rules and reinterpret policy when it was needed.

Farris taught the importance of attention to even the smallest of details. My motto became if I know something’s wrong, I fix it. He was also a role model for doing the jobs he asked others to do, like leading those five-mile runs. He knew being able to run was an asset on the battlefield.

I used Powell’s example of inclusive decision-making often, asking myself, “Who’s not at this meeting who should be?”

All three of these generals were models of integrity, placed service before self, cared about the troops and confidently executed the responsibilities of their ranks. What took them

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from good to great was a rooted sense of humility. Together they introduced me to a level of military leadership I came to expect and would judge others against throughout my career.