REPLY TO

ATTENTION OF:

AFZB-KB-J-CO 03 February 2016

MEMORANDUM FOR THE NON-COMMISSIONED OFFICERS OF J FSC, 1-26 IN BN, 2BCT, 101ST ABN (AASLT)

SUBJECT: CPT Timothy J. Swanton’s Senior Rater Philosophy

1. Purpose: As your senior rater, I understand the very important responsibility I have in shaping your future in the Army. The Army expects me to serve as a part of the process that ultimately determines who will lead our soldiers in the future. It is, therefore, my duty to describe my senior rater philosophy so that you understand how I make my rating decisions. Be assured that I do not take this duty lightly. By understanding my senior rater philosophy, you should feel free and empowered to perform your duties and take care of your soldiers, confident that I will make the decisions that are best for the Army and with your best interests in mind.

2. The Block: I will use my senior rating to identify those truly outstanding non-commissioned officers who have demonstrated through performance the potential to go to the very top of their career fields. Accordingly, I reserve the Most Qualified rating for those who should be promoted early and who are capable of performing successfully now at the next level of responsibility with clear potential for further advancement, e.g. a Sergeant First Class who could be promoted to Master Sergeant now and be an outstanding company 1SG or Operations Sergeant Major or a Staff Sergeant who is clearly ready to assume a platoon sergeant role now. I will give a Highly Qualified rating to those non-commissioned officers who are performing in an outstanding manner and who appear to be on the way to developing a reputation for service with that sort of potential, but who have not yet clearly shown themselves as being ready for early promotion and consideration as one of our top leaders for the future. Normally, when appropriate, I strongly endorse Highly Qualified NCOs for promotion, advanced schooling, and positions of increased responsibility. I will use the Qualified / Not Qualified rating for an NCO who is below average in potential and performance or has some major flaw that definitely limits performance and potential and whom I do not feel should be retained in the Army.

3. The Narrative: The narrative I write on your NCOER is directed to board members. Typically they will review individual files rather quickly which means that they will spend just a few seconds on each report so selecting the right words is critical. I will not fill up the entire block in my narrative on your report. I typically use only four or five lines and will address your potential for increased responsibility, promotion, and schooling. Where appropriate, I will quantify your performance, e.g. “among the top three” or “clearly in the top half”. I will write bullet phrases in the “active voice” and will avoid using “flowery” phrases. I have only a few seconds to make my case on your behalf so I can’t waste words.

4. Potential: Since you are a non-commissioned officer in the United States Army, I assume from the start that you possess flawless integrity, that you are courageous, and that you are physically fit until you demonstrate otherwise. Therefore, I use **demonstrated potential** for positions of increased responsibility to identify our truly outstanding NCOs. I will evaluate **demonstrated potential** using the following five categories: **Judgment, Competence, Mental and Physical Toughness, Willingness to take Risks,** and **Being a Team Player.**

 a. **Judgment**: I look at your ability to assess situations and people and make decisions, particularly under conditions of stress or uncertainty. You must be able to demonstrate good situational awareness, in garrison and in tactical situations. In other words, you need to be able to think at least two levels up and understand the “big picture” and how you and your unit can contribute. You must be able to sort out competing priorities without sufficient resources and figure out how to balance those demands while ensuring mission accomplishment and the welfare of your soldiers. You must choose your battles wisely.

b. **Competence**: You are expected to accomplish your mission every time. Failing to accomplish your mission is not an option. This does not mean that you can’t make mistakes. We all make mistakes as we grow and mature in our position. I still expect that you will accomplish whatever task you have been assigned. Solving multiple, complex tasks simultaneously, often in conditions of stress or uncertainty, is an indicator of your potential for positions of increased responsibility. Likewise, your ability to develop and implement systems to ensure the consistent, sustained success of your unit, even when you are not personally present to supervise, is vital. I am not impressed with a “quick fix” or “make it happen” mentality. Your confidence and skill in written and oral communication is another key aspect of your competence as an NCO. Regardless of your tactical prowess and intelligence, if you cannot communicate that to others, you lack the potential for increased responsibility.

c. **Mental and Physical Toughness**: Positive, confident leaders who consistently demonstrate mental and physical toughness in extreme conditions are the ones who have the potential for increased responsibility. Your ability and determination to overcome every sort of obstacle and still accomplish your mission and your ability to adapt to change are all indicators of your potential. You must be flexible and capable of making the best out of the worst possible situations, without excessive whining or complaining. This attribute also includes having the ability to make hard decisions. You must have the mental toughness and fortitude to do what is best for the organization, even though that will sometimes be personally difficult, either physically or emotionally. Your ability to bear up under pressure and harsh conditions, to drive on through adversity and discomfort, and lead by example will demonstrate your potential. You are on duty 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Your ability to use humor, especially in tough times, is another valuable aspect of your mental toughness and is very useful in helping your organization to succeed. Finally, you must have the mental toughness and courage to always give candid, honest feedback or input to me. Tell me what you believe, not what you think I want to hear.

d. **Willingness to Take Risks**: You must be willing to use your initiative and take risks. You must be able to recognize and exploit opportunities, tactically as well as administratively, in the interest of our unit. You must seek and accept responsibility. You must also be innovative. Effective and successful training and leadership require creativity. I am more likely to be disappointed with you for failing to act or make a decision than I will be if you make the wrong decision or act too brashly. This is not “carte blanche” for anarchy or chaos nor does it mean that initiative gone awry will not result in you getting your ass chewed. I am willing, however, to underwrite your honest, well-intended attempts in those situations. If you break some glass doing the right thing, tactically and in garrison, then it is my job to sweep up that broken glass and give you some more while showing you how to better handle it. However, I expect that you will always work to understand what is expected of you and to know my intent. Your risk-taking and initiative should be employed in the accomplishment of my intent and guidance. I consider your willingness to take risks, and your fostering of risk-takers within your own organization, as an essential aspect of potential.

e. **Being a Team Player**: Building the Juliet FSC Team is one of my top priorities as commander. I believe it is essential that you are a team player, that you understand the importance of team-building, and that you demonstrate an ability to build teams. Being able to get along with your peers and helping fellow non-commissioned officers and adjacent or supporting units requires a sense of humility and an unselfish attitude. I have zero patience with or interest in non-commissioned officers who are focused only on personal success or just their own unit. We all belong to larger units and have a duty and interest in the success of that larger organization as well as that of our adjacent and supporting units. Examples of being a team player include sharing good ideas, providing AAR comments after mistakes or failed efforts (airing your own dirty laundry to help others learn), inconveniencing yourself or your organization to help a sister unit, and offering to change taskings to ensure balance and fairness, even if the higher tasking headquarters overlooked it and accidentally gave your unit a “good deal”. I also expect that you will recognize that we are all trying to build our teams, just like you are trying to build your team, and that we will respect each other’s efforts.

5. How I Assess Your Potential: Evaluating leadership potential is not entirely an objective process. Like all of you, I am a product of my experiences and the leadership development efforts of my previous commanders. My instincts and intuition play a critical role in making these assessments and they will color how I evaluate each of the five categories above. However, you can be confident that I will know you comprehensively before I submit a formal assessment as part of your Non-Commissioned Officer Evaluation Report (NCOER). In order to do that, I will use multiple sources to make my assessment. I assume full responsibility for my assessment and am not bound by input from any one source. Some of the sources I will use to make my assessment include, but are not limited to, the following:

a. My personal observations of you in the performance of your duties. This is clearly the primary source for my assessment. I will see you repeatedly in many different situations so that I can know you and your potential thoroughly. My assessment will not be based on a “snap shot” of your performance. I will see you on ranges, in the motor-pool, in the field, during leader development training, in social settings, at PT, in meetings, and around the garrison. You should feel comfortable when I see you in any of those settings because you will have already seen me there so many times before. I am going to be there because I enjoy all that we do and because I am genuinely interested in helping you grow and to be successful.

b. Input from your rater. I will require your rater to rank-order you among your peers but I will not be bound by his/her recommendation. I will expect your rater to make tough calls about your performance and to provide me with his best advice regarding your potential. I expect that he/she will work hard to ensure I get a comprehensive view of your performance and potential just as I will do on his/her behalf with the Battalion Commander.

c. Informal “360 Degree” input from superiors, peers and subordinates:

(1) Input from Command Sergeants Major, First Sergeants, Platoon Sergeants, and Section Sergeants. How our superiors and subordinates view us is extremely insightful and useful in identifying our best leaders as well as growing and developing as leaders. These senior non-commissioned officers have valuable experience and judgment and can offer much in the way of input and feedback to assist me in identifying your potential as well as how you can grow and improve as an NCO. Likewise, I assume that you are working hard to establish and develop a relationship with the First Sergeant that is based on trust and honest, candid communication between the two of you. You should welcome the opportunity for your senior NCO to provide input to me as part of my assessment. This form of feedback will be indirect, as I observe your interaction with your senior non-commissioned officers and how they respond to your leadership.

(2) Input from your peers. My assessments are not based on your popularity. However, since I consider being a team player one of the most essential aspects of potential, what your peers say about you is another useful source for my assessment. Your peers will always know you better than anybody else. Furthermore, your reputation among your peers in the Army will always precede you. You should jealously guard your reputation as an NCO who is honest, competent, and willing to help a comrade. I have not yet decided on a particular format for gathering this input and may decide to use indirect feedback, relying on my observations of your interaction with your peers.

d. The readiness of your unit is important. Therefore, you should expect that other sources of my assessment include: the quality and effectiveness of your training programs (PT, marksmanship, and collective training), your maintenance status, the readiness and training of your individual soldiers, your property accountability, indicators of the level of discipline in your unit (AWOL and after-duty conduct), how you prepare your soldiers’ families for a possible deployment, and your ability to retain your best soldiers.

6. Rules of Engagement: There are a few “rules of engagement” that I will use in my application of our NCOER system.

a. Initially, I plan to manage my profile so that 1/3 of the reports I write are Most Qualified and 2/3 are Highly Qualified. This is necessary to ensure that I have the flexibility to give the Most Qualified rating to NCOs who deserve it. There will inevitably be an occasion when an NCO is due an NCOER that I have not anticipated because of unforeseen assignment instructions. That is why I need that flexibility.

b. I do not recognize any “halo effect” for those I rate or senior rate. Previous assignments, current job, your branch, recent board selections, year group, and/or endorsements from other senior leaders will not automatically place you ahead of or behind your peers. I will be aware of them but will not be bound by any of them.

c. Most of you will receive at least one Highly Qualified report. Eventually, a Highly Qualified report is probably going to be a fact of life for all of us. I will not tell you that a Highly Qualified report is “ok”. That is a relative statement. Timing of those reports is very important. I recognize that there is a difference between a Highly Qualified report and a Highly Qualified file. Current trends indicate that if you “spike”, i.e. receive at least one Most Qualified in a branch-qualifying job, regardless of when you get that Most Qualified report, you are still competitive for promotion, increased responsibility, and schooling. However, several Highly Qualified reports, in other words a Highly Qualified file, will probably limit/hinder your opportunities for increased responsibility, promotion, and schooling. Likewise, one Highly Qualified report in a branch-qualifying position will not make you noncompetitive for selection or promotion. Multiple Highly Qualified reports in those positions will make selection for platoon sergeant/first sergeant very unlikely although selection for promotion and schooling are still very possible. I will continue to advise you of these trends as the NCOER system matures. Bottom line: I believe that NCOs who consistently pursue the tough assignments, receive the “occasional” Highly Qualified report with the right words, and receive an Most Qualified report at least once in a branch-qualifying position will remain highly competitive. I understand the “heartbeat” or “spike” methodology of giving Most Qualified and Highly Qualified reports and why that has become a necessary aspect of our NCOER system and will generally act accordingly. It is my goal that each of you is able to achieve the highest level of responsibility that your talents and good fortune will permit and I will balance that goal with my duty to help identify the future leadership of the Army.

d. For an NCO who is leaving the service. You can be sure that I will work with you to do the following: (1) craft the right words to target your future career field and potential employers; (2) write a letter of recommendation; and (3) call potential employers on your behalf.

e. I will probably give a Highly Qualified for any report that covers a short rating period, i.e. three to four months, with possible exceptions for unusual circumstances or for NCOs whom I determine to have truly exceptional potential. For those NCOs who will receive multiple reports from me, I give careful consideration to block checks. You can be sure that I will always make my assessments on a case-by-case basis and do what is best for the Army every time.

7. NCOER Support Form: I believe that your NCOER Support Form is a very important part of this entire process. Use mine as a guide to ensure that you understand and are in synch with my objectives and priorities. I will update my Support Form occasionally and expect that you will want to do the same as you mature in your position. I will review your performance objectives very closely and discuss them with you at the beginning of the rated period. Throughout the rated period, I will refer to your support form, as well as my Senior Rater philosophy and my Command Philosophy, when I counsel you. At the end of the rated period, I will carefully consider your self-assessment of your progress towards accomplishing your stated performance objectives, i.e. your “significant contributions” on your support form and discuss them with you before completing my assessment on your NCOER. I owe it to you, just as you owe it to your subordinates, to provide honest, candid, meaningful evaluations based on observed performance and demonstrated potential. This is necessary not only for the purposes of the NCOER and identifying future leaders but also to ensure that every NCO is given the best opportunity to grow and develop as a leader. I want to avoid surprises at NCOER time and intend that you will know the rating I will give you well before you receive your NCOER. You do not have to put every little thing you did on your support form- but include what you think deserves the most attention and worth commenting on in your NCOER.

8. Conclusion: I will not debate the relative merits of our new NCOER system. Though not perfect, I believe that it is an effective and useful tool for assessment and selecting future leaders as well as providing a great tool for counseling and mentoring our subordinates. You already know that we advance in the Army within a pyramid system. The NCOER system is one of the key tools the Army uses to distribute non-commissioned officers inside that pyramid. As long as we don’t stray too far from the right values and we strive to make fair assessments based on demonstrated potential, our Army, an institution that we all love and respect will prevail.

9. I am always available to answer questions or discuss this philosophy at your request.

10. Legion!

TIMOTHY J. SWANTON

CPT, LG

Commanding