State of the Regiment Going From Good to Great

By Ms. Shirley A. Bridges

When Lieutenant General Robert L. Van Antwerp spoke to ENFORCE attendees in 2007, he had been the 52d Chief of Engineers for less than a week, and he focused more on the future of the Regiment than its current state. But when he addressed ENFORCE 2008 attendees on 8 May 2008, he had had a year to assess the Regiment, and he spoke about where he thinks it is now and about some of the opportunities it has to go from good to great.

"What a privilege it is to be an engineer," he said. "I want to talk to you about our Regiment today. I'm going to give you a sense of where I think we are."

He spoke of a book by Rick Warren called *The Purpose Driven Life,* in which Warren talks about metaphors—particularly a life metaphor. Unlike a simile, which would be *"your life is like. . .,"* a metaphor would be *"your life is...."* Warren suggests that—

- Life is a test.
- Life is a trust.
- Life is a temporary assignment.

LTG Van Antwerp said, "I think that was written for military people." He explained that statement by saying, "We're all going to be *tested*; we're being tested right now as a Regiment like never before." He continued, "There's a certain *trust* that we have that you only give to people in this profession. We're a profession within a profession. The military is a profession, but the Engineer Regiment is a profession within that profession." He said, "Then, there's the *temporary* nature of our assignment. In one sense, the spiritual sense, you won't live forever, and then it will be eternity. And in our case, it's the 20 or more moves we make during our career. But what wonderful things we've seen during those temporary assignments."

LTG Van Antwerp suggested another metaphor for life, and that is that it's a race. Or, more specifically, a relay race. He said that he looks out into the audience and sees all parts of the relay, and he thinks about what his part is. In a relay race, "You start with a baton, and hopefully all your team members are world class. The first runner runs his leg, and there's a stretch on the track where he has to make the handoff. He can't make it before that, and he can't make it after, or he hasn't run the race to win. He'll be disqualified. In a relay race, you have to run the race to win, but you also have to run it within the rules." He added, "Another part that has to happen is that, hopefully, you will finish well on your leg of the race. As you come to the person you have to hand off to, he has to be going at full speed when you make the handoff. That's where you can drop the ball." He said that when he thinks of the youth, and those of us who are older and experienced, we have to be sure we make the handoff.

"Life is a race. Life is a relay race." He said that if you look at the track today, it's a slippery track—a rainy track. And one reason is that there's a lot of competition for resources. He gave a couple of examples:

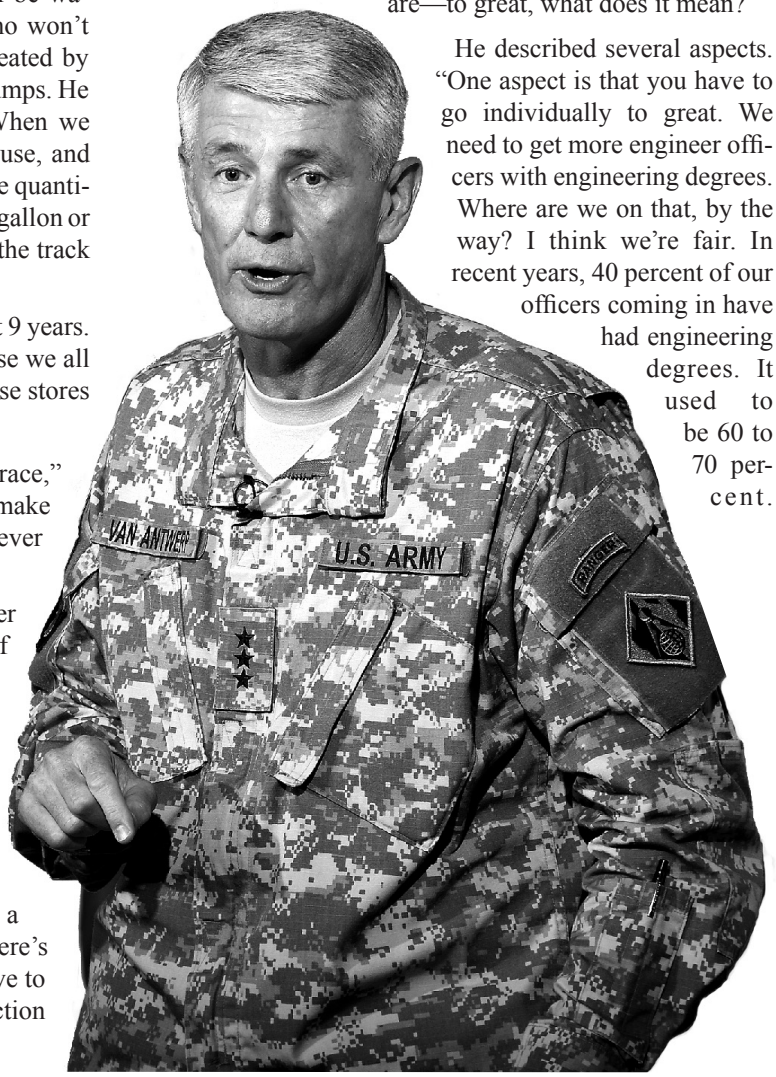
- By 2015, 40 percent of the world's nations will be water stressed. At some point, there are people who won't have drinking water. There's a lot of tension created by that in the world, and a lot of tension at the fuel pumps. He said he thinks about that for the Regiment. "When we think about fuel efficiency and the vehicles we use, and the armored vehicles that we've never had in these quantities before, what happens when fuel goes to $10 a gallon or $20 a gallon? Can it go there? I don't know, but the track is slippery and wet."
- The cost of food has gone up 45 percent in the last 9 years. There's so much pressure on food stores—because we all want to be energy independent—that some of these stores are being converted to biofuels.

"That's the context in which we're running this race," he said. "But on the other side, there are plusses that make this a special time—a time of opportunity like never before." Some of the opportunities he sees are—

- The Army's budget is greater this year than it has ever been in the history of the U.S. Army. About half of it is supplemental, and the other half is base. The base is twice as big as it was in 1995, but the force is smaller. Because of that, we should make sure that what we have is the best.
- The Army is restationing, and we have one chance to get it right. We also have a lot of changes due to the Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) Commission—and we have a deadline to be done with that by 2011. There's another deadline in our civil works in that we have to have New Orleans to a 100-year hurricane-protection level by 2011.
- The Army will grow by another 100,000 people. That number includes 10,000 more engineer Soldiers in the next 3 or 4 years. The Chief of Staff of the Army, General George W. Casey Jr., has said that the Army is now at 1 million and that it will grow by another 100,000, and that is it. He has told us to get him the best Army we can within 1.1 million.
- We have some of the best classrooms in the world—not just classrooms in the usual sense, but classrooms called *projects*, where you can go to school and you can build a competency that we've never built before.

"That's the track," he said. "Part of it is slippery and rainy, and part of it is full of opportunities like we may never know again."

"So what do we do about it, and where are we?" he asked. "If we have a scale that goes from *poor – fair – good – very good – great*, where are we now? What do you measure it against? You have to have a measuring stick. You can't just say 'it's fair' or 'it's very good.' We have to have a measuring stick. What does it mean for us to go to great? If we're going to go from where we are—from wherever you think we are—to great, what does it mean?"



He described several aspects. "One aspect is that you have to go individually to great. We need to get more engineer officers with engineering degrees. Where are we on that, by the way? I think we're fair. In recent years, 40 percent of our officers coming in have had engineering degrees. It used to be 60 to 70 percent.

Where would you rank that? We have a team assembled now to try to figure out the right percentage of engineers for the profession."

"You have to go to school," he continued. "It starts here with the Basic Officer Leader Course (BOLC), and it continues your whole lifetime through. You need to get boned up on our profession and take it upon yourself to become personally educated. That's your responsibility. The Engineer School will help, but we're not going to do it for you."

"You have to face reality, which is what we're doing now in the Regiment. How do we recruit the force we need for the future?"

He also said that we can go to great as a unit—a small unit, a squad, a buddy team, and as a Regiment. "It builds," he said, "but it starts with greatness of individuals. So where are we? I would say that right now, the Regiment is good. But I think we have an opportunity to go to great."

LTG Van Antwerp listed four things that he uses as measurements:

You have to deliver superior performance in all you do. He said that this is important whether you're in construction, doing permits, in a sapper squad, or in a unit building a forward operating base (FOB). In military programs, you have to deliver on time—or better yet, ahead of time. And you also need to do it within cost, and get the full scope of the contract. Innovative use of contractors could possibly get up to 15 percent cost savings and 30 percent time savings.

You have to set the standards for your profession. He believes that you'll know when you get there, because people will ask you to tell them what to do. They will steal ideas from you shamelessly and will want to benchmark on you. How do people evaluate us? Do they come to us and say that we set the professional standards? During Katrina, we reached out and tapped the world for answers and found that the Dutch build 10,000-year levees. "But we want people tapping us and saying that we're the experts. I think we're good here, but we can go to great."

You have to do something distinctly (positively) unique for your nation and other nations. He said that a lot of people would say that the Corps is known for something unique in New Orleans, but it wouldn't be in a positive unique sense. We used to build levees in such a way that they only offered 100-year protection, but now they're built like dams, which offer about a 10,000-year protection. And in the Gulf Region Division, we built more than 1,000 schools that held 400,000 students. Not all are occupied, and some don't have teachers. And if the local people don't buy in where we build, and there is no one to watch over the schools, the doors and windows and copper wire will disappear, and we'll have to start over. I give us a very good here, but parts of the handoff need to go to great.

You have to be built to last. "You are built to last when you can look out 10 to15 years and the force is there." So—to use the metaphor of the relay race—you have to have younger people coming on to hand off to.

He mentioned two books that engineers should read for their professional growth, both written by Jim Collins. One of them is *Good to Great*. LTG Van Antwerp said that he knows Collins, and he asked him if he'd ever used an example of a government organization like the Corps in his studies. Collins said, "You go from good to great, and we'll write about it. You start taking notes, and if you get there we'll know it when we see it." The other book is *Built to Last*. "That's where we want to go," said LTG Van Antwerp. "I think we're good, but we have an opportunity to go to great."

He told a story about how in 1995, a new police commissioner took over the New York City Police Department at a time when the city had the highest crime rate of any big city in the country. After assessing what was going on there, the new commissioner put a note on the bulletin board that read, "We're not a team of report takers; we're the police force." With that, he began to change the thinking of the department from "input" to "output." He discovered that 75 percent of all police commissioners got fired because, when their performance was evaluated, the question they were asked was "What happened to the felony crime rate in your place?" Most of those who got fired had been focused on things like how many arrests were made, the number of reports written, and the number of cases closed. LTG Van Antwerp said that the commissioner did something that you're going to have to do if you're going to go to great. He put an audacious goal on the New York City Police Department: He said that he expected to have a double-digit decrease in felonies. So he developed a plan, and they made it—and he's still there.

LTG Van Antwerp said that we need to think "What would be the output so that we'd know we were delivering superior performance? We have a lot of missions to deliver. So what is the output, and how do we know if we're great or not?"

He described the following scenario: *The strategy for brigade combat teams (BCTs) now is to go in and build small patrol bases or small forward operating bases (FOBs). But that hasn't always been the case. With the old strategy, we tried to gather human intelligence (HUMINT) from the Iraqis as we patrolled during the day. But they wouldn't tell us anything because they knew that we would be going back to our FOBs at night, and they'd be left there. They knew that they were being watched to see who they talked to. The new strategy is to get out in patrol bases or small FOBs right in the middle of the main streets, and at night we stay there.*

So if you're a young captain, and the BCT commander says, "You see these five buildings here? I know they look decrepit, and they're not what we're used to. But that's my BCT headquarters, captain. You're my engineer. I want you to figure out what the electric generating requirements are to run that. We have to have lights, we'll want showers, you'll need to provide security and lay in the communications . . . I want to have the whole geospatial picture here."

"What if you as a captain didn't study engineering, or you didn't learn how to do these things in your basic and career courses? You are in a professional dilemma." He suggests that the way to get the experience and knowledge in our people so they can do what we're asking them to do is to first make sure that they're in the right job and then train and educate them.

So what is the framework to get all of this? How do we do it? He suggests that the framework in *Good to Great* is a good one to use.

You have to have disciplined people. You have to have disciplined personnel, and you have to have disciplined leaders. And what do these leaders need to be like? The book shows a chart with leaders at Levels 1 through 5. There are two compelling traits of Level 5 leaders:

– *Be personally humble.* One definition of humble is "when your competency is properly placed"—God first, and then other people (your leaders). Another definition is that you don't need to think less about yourself, but think about yourself less.

– *Have a professional will or ambition for the business (not for yourself).* You have to resolve to do whatever is necessary to make the company great. You have to get your people in the right seat of the bus, after first making sure they're on the right bus. Don't hire someone if you're not convinced that that person is the right one for the job. And if you think you need to make personnel changes, do it now. You have to do that to go to great. In addition, if you have a problem in your organization, don't put your best people there. Put them on your biggest opportunities.

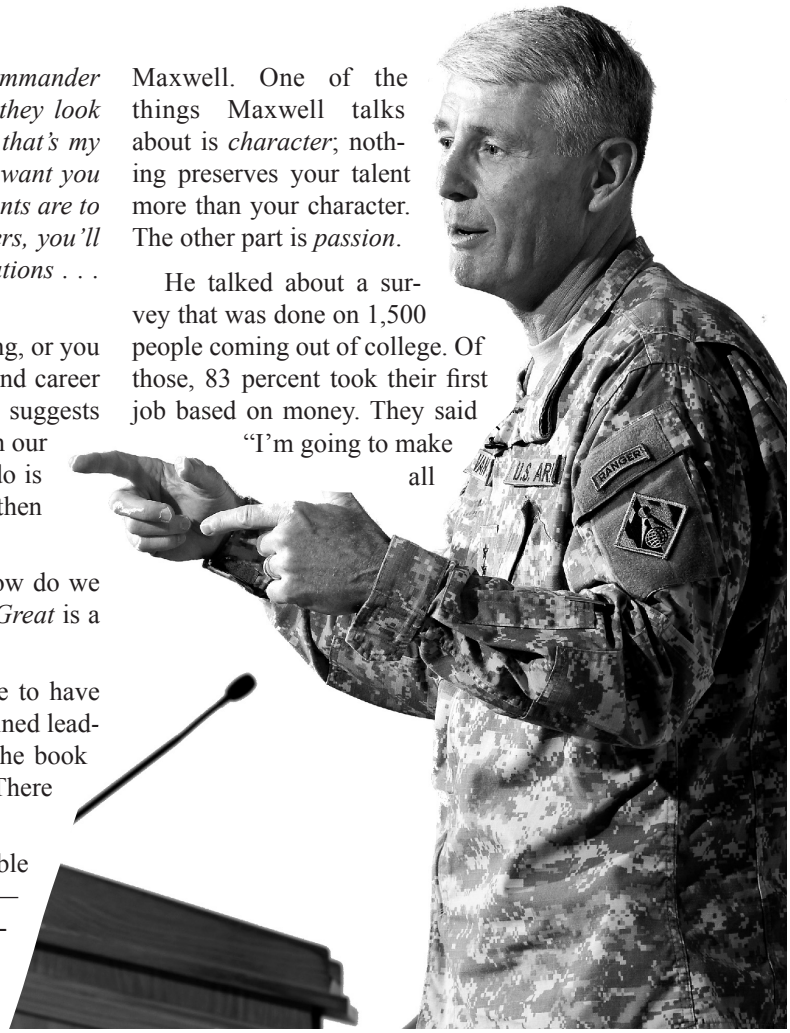
You have to put disciplined thought into it.

– *Determine your "Hedgehog Concept."* This involves focusing your efforts on what you do best. "You can't do a million things and do them well, so focus your actions along your mission."

– *Confront the brutal facts.* "You have to face reality, which is what we're doing now in the Regiment. How do we recruit the force we need for the future?"

You have to have disciplined action. You have to have self-disciplined people to have disciplined action. They must be able to stay focused on the mission and not be swayed by deterrents.

Another book that LTG Van Antwerp recommended for engineers to read is *Talent Is Never Enough* by John Maxwell. One of the things Maxwell talks about is *character*; nothing preserves your talent more than your character. The other part is *passion*.



He talked about a survey that was done on 1,500 people coming out of college. Of those, 83 percent took their first job based on money. They said "I'm going to make all the money I need, and then I'll go do what I really love to do." The other 17 percent said, "I'm going to take that first job and do what I'm passionate about, what I love to do, and I'll let the chips fall where they may." They tracked the group to see how many millionaires there were after 20 years, and they determined that there were 101 millionaires out of the group of 1,500. Of those 101 millionaires, 100 were from the 17 percent group—the passionate group.

"If you don't have passion," he said, "you need to find another seat on the bus."

LTG Van Antwerp ended his address with "I say to you as a young person—or as an older person. I am passionate. I love what I do. I love what we do. And we have such an opportunity like never before. We can build our competency so we can go to great. But you have to have passion. If you don't, we need to find a different seat for you. As a Regiment, we're good, but we have an opportunity to go to great."

"Thank you all for all you do. Sappers lead the way. God bless you, this Regiment, and God bless America."

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