Francis H. (Frank) Kearney, III

Part of Something

It's easy to see that with great power comes great responsibility, but the first step is recognizing one has great power in the first place. As a young commissioned officer at 22, Frank Kearney had no idea he had influence over his peers, paying very little mind to the impact he had as a leader. He often skipped social events—that is, until the day he was called in to the office of Lieutenant Colonel Jerry Comello. "He said he saw that I wasn't planning to attend the upcoming Hail and Farewell event, which was an opportunity to

come together as a battalion," Frank remembers. "He told me he knew my peers would come if I came, so he offered to pay for my admission."

The ensuing alchemy of shock, shame, and realization changed the young man's brain chemistry forever, opening his eyes for the first time to the power he wielded as a leader and the responsibility he had to uphold the Army's brand, integrity, and spirit. "That was my first inkling that I was

having a leadership impact across our battalion in ways I didn't know," he says. "It flipped a switch for me, and from there on out, I was in the game, fully committed to what we were doing. It was the message I needed to get serious about our mission, and a lifetime of opportunities followed."

Now, after a 35-year career holding various leadership positions in the U.S. Army, retired Lieutenant General Frank Kearney knows that true success never looks like just one person. Rather, it looks like one person opening a door for another, as Frank has strived to do for future leaders as past leaders did for him. It looks like the clockwork of a synchronized battalion, working in consort to achieve a mission. It looks like the partnership between Frank and his wife of over four decades, Betty Sue, the loving and enduring woman who has anchored him since the beginning of his career and helped raise two wonderful sons.

For Frank, success has always meant being part of something.

Even as a young boy, Frank loved donning a uniform and working to fulfill a mission, whether it was earning badges in Cub Scouts or winning games in baseball. He intuitively grasped the advantage of being goal-oriented and the joy of working toward a common victory with others. "I loved structure, and I always wanted to be part of something," he reflects now.

Growing up in a dysfunctional home,

however, being part of something wasn't always so easy. His parents had dropped out of high school in Poughkeepsie, New York, to get married, and his father had joined the Air Force. His sister was born at Sampson Air Force Base in Geneva, New York, in 1953, and Frank was born a year later at Elmendorf Air Force Base in Anchorage, Alaska. His younger sister was born the following year, and when his father left the service several years later, the family returned

Poughkeepsie, where he got a job at Central Hudson Power and Gas Company. "There was a lot of moving around, and my father had some issues with values and domestic violence," Frank recalls. "He wasn't the best person, and through observing him early on, I learned what I was not going to be as a man, leader, and father."

Preferring to pursue pastimes outside of the home, Frank enjoyed playing outside as a kid, participating in Little League Baseball and Cub Scouts. His mother gave birth to three more children, and his father earned his associate's degree at night and went to work as an insurance salesman for Prudential. He was promoted to staff manager, and the family moved to Brewster, New York, for three years. There, Frank earned his first dollar by picking up a paper route.

When Frank was entering eighth grade, the family moved again to Newburgh, New York,

where he spent the eighth grade in Catholic school and attended Newburgh Free Academy for high school. Their house was surrounded by woods, where he could spend the day hunting and fishing with friends to escape the unrest of home life. He also spent time at friends' houses and became a master card player. As soon as he was old enough to get a job, he started working at a department store nearby, selling hot dogs and ice cream.

Frank's high school was large, with over 1,000 students in his graduating class. It was a racially mixed school, and his high school years played out against a backdrop of race riots and unrest. Frank, however, was more focused on surviving the unrest in his own home. He knew his family didn't have the money to send him to college, so he set his sights on West Point during his sophomore year of high school, recognizing that his only other option was enlisting in the Army. With the help of his aunt, he competed for a Congressional nomination, got it, and then landed admission to the school, setting him on track to be the only college graduate of his immediate family. "Being admitted to West Point was a huge turning point for me, allowing me to take a new path in life," he says. "It was my first great opportunity."

While many of the new cadets around him struggled with the adjustment to West Point, Frank was free for the first time from the home environment he had worked to evade growing up, and immediately thrived. It was a close-knit, structured, challenging atmosphere where strong bonds formed quickly and adaptability was cultivated. "At West Point you essentially go through a 47-month development plan where you learn how to be a follower, a teammate, a buddy, and a leader," he explains. "We were graded almost everyday, and if you did your work, you did well. The school also had an honor code declaring that a cadet will not lie, cheat, or steal, nor tolerate those who do. This taught us moral courage and taught us to police our own culture, holding ourselves and others accountable."

The West Point way of life came so easily to Frank that he served as a cadet company commander during his senior year, among his first clearly-defined leadership positions. He had made the Dean's List during his first two years, and by the time he graduated in 1976, he was 141st in his class of 870. Graduating cadets chose their Army branch and assignment based on their order of merit in the class, so his strong academic

performance allowed him greater control over his own destiny. The most destiny-defining choice he made at that time, however, was proposing to his 19-year-old girlfriend, Betty Sue.

Frank had met Betty Sue during his junior year at the academy. At that time, he enjoyed partying as much as any college student, but he saw in Betty Sue an anchor that would keep him grounded and stable. "Her father was an incredible role model, and their family was a window into the kind of home life I wanted for myself and our future," he says. "She had gone to Catholic school all her life, and she was this wonderful. solid person who loved unconditionally. I knew she would be my compass and North Star through life, keeping me centered. I would never be where I am today if I hadn't found the right person and gotten married then. It was the start of a long journey we would take together, growing in tandem as leaders and integrators "

As a newlywed, Frank became Lieutenant at Fort Carson, Colorado, where he met Colonel Comello, the mentor who would have such a profound impact over the course of his life. It was the early post-Vietnam War period, and most people were looking to leave the Army. Frank, however, was given perfect opportunities amidst this imperfect environment, and as he watched others jumping ship, he saw that loyalty paid off in the long run. Colonel Comello gave him jobs with increasing responsibility, ultimately giving him company command as a first lieutenant. He took the opportunity and ran with it, using it as a springboard to land a position in the coveted ranger regiment as his next assignment. "If I had not commanded as a first lieutenant, I wouldn't have been able to land that assignment with the 2nd Ranger Battalion at Fort Lewis, Washington," he says.

His experience with the Rangers cemented his lifetime career in the military and his identity as a leader. At that time, the Vietnam War had ended, and with the stress of combat over, the Army refocused on building itself as a leadership development organization. The Ranger community was specifically focused on building two full-immersion units where aspiring leaders could train to lead fully resourced teams in challenging conditions. In 1980, Frank was admitted to one of these leadership laboratories, where he learned from tremendous middle managers and senior leaders in a climate where people believed they

could do anything. "It was the most positive military experience I had, and it set the stage for how to build units and cultures focused on winning," he says.

During that time, President Ronald Reagan launched an intervention in Grenada, and Frank was part of the first group to return to combat since the Vietnam War. He performed a combat parachute assault into Port Salinas Air Field on October 22, 1983, with the 2nd Ranger Battalion, and over the four days of the operation, his company suffered three deaths and thirteen wounded. "That short window of time changed everything," he recalls. "We were suddenly unique in the military amongst our generation because very few people had done a combat parachute assault since World War II, and very few had commanded a company in combat." Frank remained there in company command for 23 months, learning invaluable lessons about how to lead soldiers in combat, what not to do, and how to learn from mistakes by performing after action reviews.

From there, Frank didn't want to take the normal route to join ROTC faculty or the readiness regions to train reserve component units, so he made a few calls and found there was an opening in the Tactical Department at West Point. The position required a master's degree, so he found a one-year program at the University of South Carolina. "Betty Sue and I had one child at that point and another on the way, and it was a very peaceful and joyful year for us after nine years on the grind," he says.

Upon completion of the program, Frank returned to West Point for three years, where the renewed and refocused Army culture was matriculating into the academies and institutions of higher learning. He had direct influence over around 120 cadets, working with them in a positive way and on a routine basis, shifting the culture from leadership by penmanship to leadership by doing. "In the past, we would write up cadets if they did something wrong," he explains. "Instead, we were taking ownership of mistakes made under our leadership and fixing them together. It was a major brand shift where we taught cadets to take pride in their companies. Those cadets are now colonels and brigadier generals, and we still stay in touch."

Under the Army's leadership concept of "Be, Know, Do," Frank's work at West Point

solidified his direction as a leader of young leaders. He embraced the importance of knowing who you are as a leader, understanding the sum of your experiences and values to check them against your everyday actions and developing skill sets. From there, he was selected for intermediate education at the Army's Resident Command and General Staff College, indicating that he still had opportunities to develop and advance in the military. During the yearlong program, Frank was one of around a thousand leaders convened from across the entire Army to connect and evolve.

Frank was then able to return to the Rangers, where he planned his battalion's role in the invasion of Panama in December of 1989. "I was lucky to be in a position where I could be an architect of planning, and the combat jump went extraordinarily well," he remembers. "I was able to build on the reputation of being a good planner and leader." Tragically, the commander of the 3rd Ranger Battalion was one of three key leaders killed in a crash during a training exercise, and Frank had to step up to act as Interim Commander in his stead. He then stepped back into a regular battalion command role, departing to command an airborne battalion in Alaska during the summer of 1994-key experience needed before he could formally assume command of the 3rd Ranger Battalion.

While Frank was in Alaska, the 3rd Ranger Battalion was sent to Somalia for Black Hawk Down. The battalion suffered a number of casualties, and Frank's chief mission when he returned as Commander was helping the troops rebuild after that incredibly challenging time. "They were my guys, so it was hard that I missed that combat experience with them," he admits. "But maybe things happen for a reason, and it was important for me to have that strength to be there for them when they got back."

When Frank finished Battalion Command as a Lieutenant Colonel, he went on to Army War College before heading to Bosnia to work for his old Ranger Regimental Commander, Major General Dave Grange. There, Frank worked for six months as Chief of the Joint Military Commission, mediating between the three warring factions of Bosnians, Croatians, and Serbs. Working with international partners, peacekeepers, the Office of Security Cooperation in Europe, and other stakeholders broadened his horizons tremendously, opening his eyes to the day-to-day

details of other challenges going on in the world.

Frank was then assigned to Italy for Brigade Level Command, where he served as the reserve force for the Balkans and Kosovo. When he wasn't working on military exercises, he traveled around Europe with Betty Sue and sent his oldest son off to college. He was then selected to be an Operations Officer for the Joint Special Operations Command, spending the next three and a half years working on the invasions and follow-on operations of Iraq and Afghanistan and tracking former Yugoslavian war criminals. "We were either back home on alert, or in Afghanistan, Iraq, Lebanon, the Horn of Africa, or North Africa, working on operations in support of Operation Enduring Freedom," he reports. By 2005, he was commanding all the theater special operations troops in the Middle East, amounting to around 10,000 people.

In 2007, Frank was promoted to Lieutenant General and moved to U.S. Special Operations Command in Tampa, Florida. As a 3-Star General, he served as Deputy Commander of U.S. Special Operations Command, where his role changed completely. As part of the Undersecretary of Defense's Advisory Working Group, he worked alongside the service Vice Chiefs, the Joint Staff, and all of the Undersecretaries for the Department of Defense. "I had been a combat soldier, and now I was responsible for a budget, and for integrating our budget with the other services who provided all of our personnel and some of our equipment and pay," he says. "Over the next three years, I spent most of my time traveling to DC, working as part of this unique forum to learn how the DoD runs the nation's defense business."

At the end of his assignment, Frank planned on retiring, but the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff asked him to stay on at the National Counterterrorism Center in DC, a relatively new organization created by the Intelligence Reform Act in the wake of 9/11. Now, Frank was operating within a larger interagency community composed of the National Security staff, the Office of the President, the White House, and the State Department. "I never expected to have that kind of job, but it was illuminating, teaching me a lot about how to help people guide organizations through peer leadership," he says. "Virtually every department and agency has a role to play in the War on Terror, so it's key that the various personalities and departments come together in ad hoc groups to participate in the decision making and implementation process. It was the last step in a long career where I learned something new at every level and every job, broadening my horizons and stretching me as a leader and person into things I had no idea I'd ever touch." Frank retired on January 1, 2012, a successful Lieutenant General after almost 40 years after entering West Point.

Now, Frank is associated with the Thayer Leader Development Group, an organization grounded in sharing military leadership training with corporations and housed on the edge of West Point. Through speaking engagements, business seminars, and mentorship, he continues to uphold the core idea that every U.S. military leader has a responsibility to develop the next generation, teaching others that great leaders environments characterized by trust, camaraderie, and personal growth. "If I'm in an organization, I'm all in," he explains. "I'm accountable for it, and it's my job to help it get better." Frank also serves as Chairman of the Advisory Board for Team Red White and Blue, a nonprofit dedicated to reintegrating soldiers, sailors, airmen, and marines back into hometown life. He further supports veterans through his volunteer work to host special events for wounded warriors and their families or caregivers in Whitefish, Montana.

In advising young people entering the working world today, Frank says to drop your baggage at the door. "If you have a preconceived notion about a person or organization, it's probably inaccurate," he says. "Be open-minded, inquisitive, and curious. Be brave enough and intentional enough to make your own decisions and come to your own conclusions about the world around you."

Beyond that, he stresses the importance of truly loving what you do. "If you're not having fun, you're in the wrong profession," he says. "I loved every single day I spent in the military. And reflecting back on it all, I see that it was always my job to help by opening doors for others. I grew up a survivor, making my way on my own, and I didn't want to believe I had to rely on anyone for anything. But I realize now that people were always opening doors for me along the way, and the best thing I can do is open doors for others so that they, too, can be part of something."

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- By Gordon J. Bernhardt, CPA, PFS, CFP®, AIF®

About Gordon J. Bernhardt
President and founder of Bernhardt Wealth
Management and author of Profiles in Success:
Inspiration from Executive Leaders in the
Washington D.C. Area, Gordon provides financial
planning and wealth management services to affluent

individuals, families and business-owners throughout the Washington, DC area. Since establishing his firm in 1994, he and his team have been focused on providing high-quality service and independent financial advice to help clients make informed decisions about their money. For more information, visit www.BernhardtWealth.com and Gordon's Blog.

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