

West Point Pioneer Says Battle-Tested Lessons Make Her a Better Leader

VFW's Department of Hawaii Commander Debra Lewis is using her life experiences in the military to help others see stress as a friend — not a foe

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Debra Lewis vividly recalls the extra dessert placed at her table in the cavernous mess hall during her first week at West Point in 1976.

She was among the first group of women allowed to enter the military academy that year but quickly realized that not all were so welcoming.

In that medieval-like dining hall, hazing was all too common, said Lewis, commander of VFW's Department of Hawaii. It wasn't just the women getting hazed, of course. Male cadets were often hazed merely for talking to the female cadets. Yet there was something about that extra dessert that struck a chord in Lewis.

It turned out that Jorge Chavez, a Chilean waiter, had noticed Lewis getting especially picked on in the mess hall and was making sure she had an extra bit of sweetness at mealtime.

"It made such a difference in my life," Lewis said. "It just takes one act of kindness to make a difference in life. At the end of my time at West Point, I presented Jorge with an engraved saber."

Lewis, whose father also attended West Point before embarking on a prestigious Army career as a lieutenant general, had not planned to follow in her dad's footsteps. Instead, she had her eyes on the University of Virginia, followed by medical school, where she would study to be a doctor.

However, through friends of friends, Lewis was encouraged to apply to West Point so that she could be on the equestrian team since she was an avid horseback rider. She went on to

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become the riding team captain during her time at West Point.

Lewis laughed recalling how she felt she was fully prepared for West Point. That is, until the running began on day two. For Lewis, who admittedly is not a runner, it was brutal.

“It was a 2-mile run in formation but I had only prepared for 1.5 miles,” Lewis said. “I was getting very nervous. In front of me there was another woman who ran like a gazelle — she was smiling and not breaking a sweat. The run was beyond my abilities, but what I did next changed my life. I just learned to focus on each stride.”

That lesson has been the driving force throughout Lewis’s life. It’s also a lesson she shares with others to this day as a stress management coach.

‘I LOVED WHAT I DID’

Following her time at West Point — Lewis was one of 62 women in her graduating class — she embarked on a career in the Army, which included a deployment in 2006-2007 to Iraq with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, where she commanded the Central District in the Gulf Region Division.

In Iraq, Lewis led engineers in building everything from firehouses and treatment plants to schools in Baghdad and Al Anbar Provinces. She said it was “meaningful” engineering work in how it helped the people of Iraq.

“I could have never succeeded in combat if I hadn’t had all those experiences leading up to it,” she said. “I learned so much from those experiences. I may not have liked all the people I worked with, but I loved what I did. I was an engineer.”

Lewis said for her, life is about always looking ahead and looking for ways to make things better. She said that after getting knocked down, yelled at, spit at and harassed, she figured out the key is to simply get back up.

“Bad stuff happens to everyone,” she said. “Focus on what gets you through.”

After retiring from the Army in 2010 as a colonel, Lewis embarked on a career as a stress expert helping others manage life stressors. Her website, www.mentallytoughwomen.com, offers two free online courses on stress management in addition to other resources.

Lewis made two of the courses free after COVID-19 plowed through the world in 2020. To

date, the courses have helped more than 4,000 people in 119 countries.

In 2021, Lewis released a book “Why is Pono not Pono Today?” She never intended it to be for children necessarily, but it has been widely received by educators.

Set in Hawaii, Pono the bull and his friend Kuleana help adults and children alike bring out their best when stressed. A fifth-grade teacher reached out to Lewis after she shared the book with her students. She told Lewis that an autistic boy in her classroom asked if he could look at the book again after hearing it. He told his teacher he wanted to learn how to manage his emotions.

“I knew that even if I just changed one life with this book, that it was worth it,” Lewis said. “I did that.”

An online companion course to the book — “Take Your Kids from Stressed to Success” — also is available on Lewis’s website.

Lewis said she believes that a lack of stress skills holds most people back from achieving full potential. It’s particularly true, she said, in the veteran community.

“Veterans are constantly labeled with PTSD as though it’s a life sentence,” she said. “They just need ways to overcome it. We have to make people stronger. Veterans are our greatest source of strength.”

‘UNITED IN ALOHA’

In 2011, Lewis and her husband, retired Army Lt. Col. Douglass Adams, to whom she’s been married 22 years, embarked on a U.S. continental journey called “Duty, Honor, America Tour.”

Adams, also a West Point graduate, cycled his way across the country with Lewis following in an RV. The 18,000-mile trip, which crisscrossed every state, gave Lewis and Adams the chance to thank veterans and active-duty personnel as well as their families for their service.

The duo understands the sacrifices military families make in supporting their uniformed loved ones. Between the two of them, Lewis and Adams have three children — Emily Cardarelli, Douglass Adams and Theresa Adams — and one grandson, Mac Adams.

The last 222 miles of the trip was in Hawaii, where the couple decided to put down roots in Hilo on the Big Island. It was on that last leg of the journey that Lewis became acquainted with VFW Post 3830 in Pahoa, about 45 minutes from her home. In 2016, she became Post commander, a position she held for three years.

Lewis was encouraged by Department of Hawaii Quartermaster Norbert Enos to run for the

position of Department junior vice commander.

After her election as Department commander last year, Lewis announced her theme, “United in Aloha.” Her logo is a shield — protection from harm.

“I chose this theme because we overcome our greatest challenges by working closely together and supporting each other with aloha,” she said. “Every organization faces leadership challenges, and we must be up for the challenge. It’s up to me to help people armor up.”

Lewis said she and Adams find Hilo to be the “perfect community” in which to live because of the caring nature of the people there.

One example of that caring spirit is the partnership between VFW Post 3830 and the Yukio Okutso State Veterans Home in Hilo. The Post Auxiliary made fidget blankets — blankets adorned with buttons, zippers and Velcro to keep hands busy — for the residents.

Lewis plans to finish her year as Department commander doing what she does best — helping people be the best version of themselves.

“Veterans have some of the biggest gifts to offer the community,” she said. “Together, we can lift people to be more empowered to do what they want to do in life.”

This article is featured in the 2022 March issue of [VFW magazine](#), and was written by [Janie Dyhouse](#), senior editor for VFW magazine.