

Thankful for What Once Seemed a Negative



When Karsten Lundring talks about his initial rationale for joining Officer Candidate School as a recently graduated newlywed back in early 1966, he does so with his customary infectious laugh and self-effacing humor:

"They told me about the extra training it would involve -- that it would be 10 months of training first and then the service. 'So I can't I be sent away during the 10 months?' I asked. 'No, you'll be in the training for 10 months as long as you don't flunk out.' I thought, 'Oh man -- 10 months is almost a year! This thing in Vietnam will be over by then.' And that's how I chose to go to OCS."

Of course, 1966 turned out to be the year of massive escalation of the Vietnam War. It would be nine miserable years before it would be over.

Nevertheless, says Karsten, whose degree from Cal Lutheran (1965) was what made him eligible for OCS, "I have been thankful for that comment and my thinking on it, even though it was absolutely wrong. It ended up being a good move for me."

At first, it's hard to see how that could be. The government wasn't supposed to draft married men -- but changed its mind two weeks prior to Karsten and Kirsten's wedding and he ended up drafted.

Stationed at Ft. Knox, Kentucky, he learned, after waiting in a long line to use a phone booth for a call with his wife, that Kirsten was expecting. He couldn't see her because an outbreak of spinal meningitis put the camp on lockdown.

To keep tabs on her pregnancy, "My dad would take a side picture of Kirsten every week at church, and I would get it every Wednesday or Thursday," Karsten recalls.

That baby turned out to be "a future president of Ascension Lutheran Church," he adds with a smile -- none other than our own Sherith Squires.

"I didn't see her until she was two months old," says her dad.

Now, to understand how all this could become a positive, it's worth taking a look back when Karsten was first in OCS and he had a run-in with a TAC officer.

He and Kirsten had been active in their Lutheran church in Pasadena, including in their Luther League group, and "They had given me a pocket New Testament as a going away gift," he says. "I kept that in my pocket and often pulled it out for support."

However, in OCS, trainees were required to go full spit 'n' polish, including highly starched fatigues with flat pockets. His trainer called him out for having something in his pocket and demanded Karsten drop and give him 25 pushups. Karsten got out his New Testament, then, and said, 'Sir, I will do the pushups. And I'm going to carry this with me.'" He ended up being the only trainee there who was allowed to carry something in his pocket.

Things improved after he was commissioned and sent to Ft. Lewis in Washington State, which "was like a city," he says, housing some 40,000 troops. There, Kirsten and their daughter could join him.

For a time, he was a 23-year-old assigned to train 18-year-olds, something he evidently did well enough to catch the attention of higher-ups. Eventually, he wound up as the aide-de-camp to the fort's commanding general.

"He was very good Christian guy. We went to the same chapel on post. We had a colonel who was a chaplain -- and he could preach!" Karsten recalls.

As aide-de-camp, he was privy to the inner workings of top brass. He accompanied the general to the Pentagon. He witnessed "powerful people making really tough decisions --their-fact finding, their attention to detail. I just gained a whole new kind of respect for them," he says.

He was also good at interfacing with civilians, it turned out. Smart, a great people person, utterly trustworthy, firm in his faith -- just as he showed that day with his pocket New Testament...No wonder the general opted not to release Karsten from his service to be reassigned.

Out of 250 in Karsten's OCS class, all but five went to Vietnam. He was one of the five.

"I didn't have a very good attitude going in. I resented being drafted as a newlywed, and when I found out Kirsten was pregnant..." he trails off. "Now I am so thankful for being led in that direction. For both Kirsten and I, the Army experience at Fort Lewis was terrific. We became very thankful."

Bloom where you're planted. (See 1 Corinthians 7:17)

