



# From Enlisted to Officer: 1LT Grotkowski's Path to Leadership and Balance

Article by:  
Lopez-Ramirez, Cinthia

11LT James Grotkowski serves in the Mississippi Army National Guard as an officer in the Transportation Corps, where he has built a reputation as a dedicated leader and an advocate for servant leadership. His military journey began in April 2019, when he enlisted as an 88M, or Motor Transport Operator, a role that demands the logistical expertise needed to keep military operations moving efficiently. Following his enlistment, Grotkowski completed Basic Combat Training (BCT) at Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri, in July 2019, where he demonstrated his resilience and determination. He then moved on to Advanced Individual Training (AIT), where he excelled, finishing in the top 20 percent of his class.

By February 2020, Grotkowski had reported to his first unit and quickly adapted to life as an enlisted soldier. However, his ambitions extended beyond his role as a Motor Transport Operator. With a clear vision of becoming an officer, he enrolled in Mississippi's Officer Candidate School (OCS) in June 2020. OCS is known for its rigorous demands, both physically and mentally, and Grotkowski's journey through the program was no exception. He faced challenges that tested his endurance and character, particularly the sacrifices that come with time away from family. For his 65 months in the military, Grotkowski has spent approximately 21 months away from home. Despite these hardships, he successfully graduated from OCS in March 2021, marking a significant milestone in his career.

Upon returning to his original unit, Grotkowski assumed the role of Distribution Platoon Leader, where he was responsible for overseeing the logistical support necessary to maintain mission readiness. His leadership style is rooted in the principles of servant leadership, where he prioritizes the well-being and development of his soldiers. Grotkowski believes in leading by example and inspiring his team through influence and collaboration rather than relying on strict authority. One of his most notable achievements came during annual training, where he led an entire Battalion's operations without the support of senior Non-Commissioned Officers (NCOs). His ability to accomplish this task earned him the Army Commendation Medal, an honor that he attributes to the collective efforts of his team.

In addition to his military responsibilities, Grotkowski manages a civilian career as the owner of a construction company. This role requires him to balance the demands of his National Guard duties with the pressures of running a business. This dual commitment has taught him valuable lessons in time management and mental resilience. He emphasizes the importance of physical fitness and maintaining mental health, using exercise as a way to stay grounded and keep his focus. Grotkowski approaches each day with a mindset of prioritizing small victories and avoiding the stress of overwhelming challenges.

For enlisted soldiers who aspire to become officers, Grotkowski offers valuable advice based on his own experiences. He stresses the importance of showing up physically fit and prepared, as OCS demands a high level of physical endurance. Equally important is the mental resilience required to navigate the challenges of officer training. "Don't quit," he advises, "and remember the tactics you're taught, as those tactics will keep you alive in battle." Grotkowski also emphasizes the need for officers to place the mission and their soldiers first, always leading to bringing troops home safely.

In 1LT James Grotkowski's view, effective leadership is rooted in a blend of approachability, strong command presence, and leading by example. He believes that to truly inspire and motivate soldiers, a leader must first be accessible and open. Soldiers should feel comfortable approaching their leaders with concerns, ideas, or questions, without fear of being dismissed or judged. This open line of communication fosters trust, which is crucial for building a cohesive and high-performing unit. Grotkowski strives to create an environment where every soldier feels heard and valued, knowing that their contributions and well-being are essential to the team's success. Along with approachability, Grotkowski emphasizes the importance of maintaining a strong command presence, exuding confidence, decisiveness, and professionalism in every situation. In his view, a leader's presence inspires respect and sets the standard for behavior and performance.

However, 1LT Grotkowski believes that leadership goes beyond simply giving orders or setting an example from a distance. He is a firm advocate of leading by doing—being willing to get in the trenches with his soldiers and perform the same tasks he asks of them. Whether it's participating in physical training, managing logistical challenges, or tackling day-to-day tasks, Grotkowski ensures that his team sees him working alongside them. This hands-on approach not only boosts morale but also earns the respect of his soldiers, who know he would never ask them to do something he wouldn't do himself. For Grotkowski, leadership is about demonstrating commitment and showing that no task is beneath him. This servant-leader mindset, where the needs of soldiers come first, guides every decision he makes. As he advances in his military career, these principles remain central to his leadership philosophy, driving him to create cohesive, mission-driven teams capable of excelling in even the most challenging environments.