

Live Honor First!

Our motto “Honor First” first appeared in print in the Annual Report of the Commissioner General of Immigration, July 1926 through June 1927. The Patrol was 3 years old when the report was finalized, but our culture was taking root. We know this because our Agents were already using the phrase as evidenced by the exact quotation:

“‘Honor First’ is its watch word; privations and danger but serve as a challenge which none refuse. Unfailing courtesy to all, and helpfulness to the helpless in distress, are emphasized above every other requisite.” [1927](#)

Think about those words. Think about what they mean – “but serve as a challenge which none refuse” and “above every other requisite” stand out for me. While we no longer write and speak in such eloquent terms, I believe these words are in the heart of every Border Patrol Agent today.

Fast forwarding to 1930, the Border Patrol’s future 7th [Chief](#), N. Donald Collaer (then the Assistant Superintendent, El Paso district) provided a four page memo to our newest Border Patrol Inspectors. Among a list of “Do’s” and “Don’ts” still worth reading, Chief Collaer noted:

“You are congratulated on having been selected as a member of the U.S. Immigration Service Border Patrol, which we proudly believe is to be the finest law-enforcing agency of the Federal Government. ... First, your attention is invited to the watch-word of our Border Patrol...- “HONOR FIRST”!

He further challenged our newest recruits to understand this was an infallible commitment.

If you feel that due to your personal inclinations, habits, or for any other reason, it will be impossible or difficult for you to live up to our standards, as indicated by our watch word, RESIGN NOW! On the other hand, should you feel that you can and will be a credit to this organization, you will find each and every member thereof willing to assist you to make good.” [1930](#)

Our founders communicated two USBP foundation concepts intertwined: *Honor First* was expected of all new recruits because it is a shared value of our workforce. This was not a leadership-driven slogan. It was the motto of the rank and file serving on the frontline. Those agents demanded the Border Patrol be synonymous with integrity, decency, and morality. They demanded it of themselves and their peers. They lived *Honor First*.

The world has changed, but I challenge that our values have not. Nor should they. We must guard against erosion of the concepts *Honor First* represents. It is not a catch phrase. It is a creed - our creed. I often say, “Integrity in all things – large and small.” I have heard others say, “Integrity is doing the right thing when nobody is looking.” This is living *Honor First*.

I challenge each and every one of us to live *Honor First* by not accepting questionable behaviors in ourselves, in our peers and in our Patrol. We are not *above* the law. We are charged with enforcing the law. I charge you to *live* it because I believe it is *our* calling. Some behaviors may not be easily defined such as excessive drinking and socially unacceptable actions. Others are more easily identified such as disobeying authority, minor and major violations of law,

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regulations or policy, failing to abide by stated values. With *Honor First* as your guiding principle, you will make the right choice every time.

Returning the 1927 Annual Report, I want to highlight something they said of us.

“...they are accustomed to discipline, take readily to it, and like it; they are charged with a serious responsibility and keenly realize it. In the vast majority of cases their work is a religion.”

My goal is to elevate *Honor First* to its rightful source of organization pride and esprit de corps. It requires the personal effort of every employee to be honest and to embody ethical behavior - in short to demonstrate integrity in all things small and large. We must comply with laws, regulations and policy with which we may not always fully agree. *Honor First* means holding ourselves, organizationally and personally, accountable to values our founding frontline Agents took as their creed. The same values Americans expect of and deserve from us today. We best provide those values by using *Honor First* as the guiding principle of our personal and professional conduct.

I pledge to you, I will conduct myself with *Honor First* foremost in my mind. I will never knowingly tarnish the U.S. Border Patrol by action nor inaction. Furthermore, I charge my staff to hold themselves to the same standard. Together, we will build fair policies and procedures. When no other viable options exist, we will publish our exceptions to those practices to promote transparency and trust. We will live *Honor First* examples of unwavering ethical behavior. We will live by our watchword as Chief Collaer charged us 90 years ago. I invite you to join us. Help us elevate *Honor First* and elevate the culture of our organization. Help reignite the pride of being a member of the United States Border Patrol.

Honor First!



RODNEY S. SCOTT
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Date