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SHARING SUCCESS – OWNING FAILURE

PREPARING TO COMMAND IN THE 21ST CENTURY AIR FORCE

By

David L. Goldfein, Col, USAF

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Preface

Congratulations on your selection for the most challenging and rewarding job in the Air Force – squadron command. The intent of this paper is to help you prepare mentally for the task ahead by discussing a few themes central to a successful command tour. It will not answer all of your questions about “*how to command*”; nor will it break any radically new ground in the “*art of leadership*”. Rather, the ideas expressed here are intended to spark your imagination as you begin preparing now for how ***you*** want to command ***your*** squadron.

These thoughts are not mine alone. In researching this project, I asked officers from across the Air Force, recently from command, to share stories of the greatest challenges they faced. What was the environment? How did they react? Why did they choose a particular path? Most importantly – what did they learn from the experience? Many of the stories I included in the paper involve situations in which the individual failed. Why? Because, it is from studying our failures that we learn, grow, and improve as officers and leaders. As a commander, you will be privileged to share in the success of your organization; however, you will personally own every failure. In the end, this is the true loneliness of command. Failure comes with risk and both are integral to a successful command tour.

I am greatly indebted to the officers who participated in this project. Sharing ***success*** is relatively easy. Owning ***failure***, however, and then sharing the story of that failure in a published paper took courage and a commitment to helping you succeed. Additionally, this project was significantly improved by the keen insight and editing skill

of Maj.Gen (ret) Perry Smith. His book, *Rules and Tools for Leaders*, remains among the most practical guides to command and leadership written.

Read over the ideas presented here with a critical eye and think now about how you will react given similar circumstances. Ask important questions such as: what are my expectations of command? What do the troops expect of me? What will be my vision? How will I create an environment that ensures mission success? How will I build my team? How will I handle justice? Who is ultimately responsible for fun in my squadron? By thinking critically about these questions now, you will be better prepared to lead successfully in the greatest job you will ever have.

Good luck commander!

Chapter 1

Expectations of Command

“None of us is as smart as all of us”

Ken Blanchard, Don Carew, and Eunice Parisi-Carew
The One Minute Manager

Any dialogue on preparation for command must begin by discussing expectations. No doubt you remember clearly the day you were informed of being chosen for command. Anticipation mixed with pride and a fair amount of uncertainty and fear – sound familiar? This section will discuss some key issues associated with what your boss expects; what your troops expect of you; and perhaps most importantly – what you can expect of the command experience.

What Does the Boss Expect?

“As a wing commander, the most important personnel decision I ever made was the selection of my squadron commanders. No other officer would have a greater positive or negative effect on our ability to accomplish the mission”

-- Brig Gen Dan Leaf
31st Fighter Wing Commander

Leaders who hire subordinate commanders have a responsibility to provide an answer to the first question by clearly laying out their expectations for success. Too often, command in the Air Force is viewed as a test of the individual for future service rather than an opportunity for the organization to succeed and thrive under proven leadership. This over-arching focus on testing of the *individual* rather than on the success of the *unit* has resulted over time in a correspondingly shallow program to formally prepare you for command. In comparison with our sister services, a Navy officer who is chosen for a 36-month command tour will spend the first 18 months as an executive officer (focused on learning the art of command) in the very unit he or she will eventually lead. Likewise, an Army or Marine officer will be required to attend several long training courses focused on command and leadership prior to accepting the colors of his or her first unit. In contrast, Air Force officers selected for command are currently required to attend a one-week course focused largely on *staying out of jail* rather than *leading effectively*. This lack of emphasis on thoroughly preparing an individual to succeed in command suggests an even greater need for you and your new boss to establish mutually understood expectations for success.

As you begin the transition process, set up an appointment with your commander. Ask him or her about their expectations and indicate that you are open to any advice they might have on command – they’ve likely been in your position. Important safety tip – don’t arrive without pen and pad in hand. One officer I know showed up for an interview with his Numbered Air Force Commander and was tossed out of the office to find writing tools – not the way you want to begin your tour. The bottom line – don’t leave the interview until you understand clearly what is expected of you as a commander. An

outstanding book that offers superb advice on the transition process is *Right From the Start: Taking Charge in a New Leadership Role* by Dan Ciampa and Michael Watkins.

Sometimes, a face-to-face meeting is not possible prior to a command change. In these cases, send a note to your new boss and request his or her thoughts on their expectations for success. Here is a letter written to new commanders by Col. William Lord, who served as the Communications Director for HQ AMC. In it, he outlines his expectations and helps his new commanders chart their course for success:

Congratulations on being named squadron commander – it is the best job in the Air Force, and the toughest. To help you get off on the right foot, I'd like to offer some words to help with your mental preparation.

To start with you need a command philosophy and initial focus. Three reasons: (1) you only have one chance at a first impression, (2) for much of what you actually accomplish in your 2-year command tour, you must first establish a focus in your initial 6 months, and (3) your first few weeks will haunt you if you aren't prepared. Those entrusted to your charge want and need to be led from day 1 of your command tour.

Get to know and network with your fellow commanders – irrespective of career field, MAJCOM, or specialty. If you succeed, you will become senior officers together before you know it. You will need one another. If you regard each other as competitors, you will hurt yourselves, your command chain, and our Air Force. Don't get lost in the "glamour of being the boss". You'll find the experience produces many rewards (not awards) along with a good measure of hard work and disappointments.

Now is a good time to send a short thank you to family members and any mentors that helped you during your career. Don't substitute with email – the personal touch and a hand-written note show good breeding. If you haven't sent a note to your new boss and wing king, do so – they selected you.

Take time to scrutinize your personal affairs. From relationships to money matters, you need to be squeaky clean. As a commander, you will sit in judgment of others, and you cannot afford to surrender the moral

high ground – ever! You are expected to be above reproach. Your personal life won't get you promoted, but it can rapidly do you in.

Study up on your officers and senior NCO's before you take command – my office can help with personnel briefs and RIP's. These are your charges – worry about them, guide them, and develop them to become your replacement, or at least someone you'd be proud to have associated with your name. These troops shouldn't be worrying about their next assignment – that's your job.

Plan out your first 30 days now and have in mind what you want to accomplish. Some hints:

- Publish your command philosophy.
- Meet with your Top 3 (or 4) the first day.
- Visit every work center and every shift. Keep these visits regular.
- Determine the areas you are least comfortable with and focus on these. Don't be afraid to ask questions – the troops will respect your interest
- Meet all of your fellow commanders on their turf.
- Call on the Wing SEA, MPF Flight Commander, Chaplain and all other agencies that provide service to your unit.
- Inspect the dorm and eat in the dining facility.
- Write job descriptions of each of your key subordinates and give them out one on one.
- Schedule a commander's call within the first month

Take ownership of every part of your organization and teach this to subordinate leaders. Once you've walked past trash on the ground, a wall that needs paint, or a broken door, you've just blessed it – and you'll continue to overlook it every day after that – until it gets pointed out by your boss.

Establish immediately that your signed signature is your bond. It's hard to get credibility back once your name becomes meaningless. Always insist on putting the actual date of signature on everything you sign.

Spouse involvement in unit and base activities – there aren't any absolutes. The only wrong answers are zero and everything. If your spouse is a joiner and a doer, encourage it. If not – don't force it. Just remember that taking care of the families in your unit is an important part of the job – we recruit individuals, but we retain families. How you go about this will

vary but the responsibility will always exist. If not your spouse, find someone who will help you manage this area.

Finally, be an officer and an airman first – a communicator last. Aerospace power is our business – comm and information is our contribution. Make a concerted effort to stay current on operational issues and doctrine. If you don't understand aerospace power application, it's nearly impossible to effectively support the business.

Again, congratulations on your selection for command. I look forward to working with you to accomplish our mission.¹

Any question what this leader expects of his new commanders? With a few personal touches, this letter can serve as an excellent start for your letter to subordinate commanders and supervisors. Remember, establishing clear and mutually understood expectations with your flight commanders and flight chiefs will be your responsibility as well.

What do the Troops Expect?

"It is surprising how much you can get accomplished if you don't care who gets the credit."

-- Abraham Lincoln

Now what about the troops – what are their expectations of you as a new commander? To answer this question, I surveyed the USAF Senior NCO Academy and asked attendees to answer the following questions: what do you expect from your new commander; how do you define a successful commander; and most importantly, what do you NOT want to see in your new boss?

¹ Lord, William T, Col, USAF, interview, Nov 00

Among the most thoughtful responses came this one from SMSgt Michael Brake, a flight leader at the academy and former assistant to CINCSTRATCOM:

1. I expect leadership in action – not by proxy. Commanders must get out from behind their own perceived comfort zones and get to know their folks. I’ve experienced too many stories of shift personnel being surprised by senior leadership visiting them on a mid, swing, or weekend shift. Shouldn’t be a surprise – should be expected. No other way for the commander to get the true pulse of their personnel.
2. Leaders make mistakes – and grow through the opportunity. Don’t be afraid to make them and fess up when you do – subordinates will know you are real. At the same time, understand that subordinates also make mistakes and need the same opportunity to grow as a result. Accountability yes, perfection -- impossible.
3. Communication is vital – goes with number 1. Unless it is detrimental to the organization, share information. The result will be less rumors and inclusion thereby making everyone feel significant.
4. Empower personnel. Former Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force Sam Parrish said it best: “If what they want to do is (a) good for the Air Force; (b) good for the individual; and (c) doesn’t hurt anyone – why stop them?”
5. Live by the core values. Live by the core values. Live by the core values.²

Here is another entry from SMSgt Beverly Hill, also a Flight Chief at the Senior NCO Academy and former command systems manager at Robins AFB, who explains her expectations of a new commander as follows:

1. In the commander, I am looking for someone who lives the core values every day. If you are wrong, admit it up front. Have the courage to

² Brake, Michael, SMSgt, USAF, interview, Dec 00

stand up, without ever compromising personal beliefs, for what is right and fair. Don't say one thing and do another – we see what is *done*, not what is *said*.

2. I define a successful commander as one who supports, and in some cases stands up, for his or her people when they are right. Additionally, I look for someone who treats everyone fairly and is inclusive (decision makers should include male, female, minorities, enlisted). Finally, a successful commander has high standards and demands that his/her officers also reflect and live the core values.
3. What I don't want to see is a commander who is partial to certain individuals; one who won't support you as a professional; or one who doesn't have the courage to support tough, unpopular decisions up the chain of command. Clearly, I don't want a commander who is dishonest.³

The final entry comes from SMSgt Christopher Schloemer, former First Sergeant and now an instructor at the academy:

1. Listen. I have a lot of experience to offer. Nothing puts me off more than a new commander that knows it all already. Obviously, you have new ideas and a new perspective, but hopefully, also an open mind.
2. Be decisive. A wishy-washy commander is death for an organization. Make informed decisions as much as possible. See #1 above.
3. Be consistent. As with anyone, you will have both good days and bad. However, if the troops come in and ask the secretary "what kind of mood is he/she in today" your organization will not be as effective.
4. Be visible. The troops need to see you. I used to put "walk around" time on my commander's schedule. Nothing raises morale more than knowing the commander cares enough to visit them in their work areas.

³ Hill, Beverly, SMSgt, USAF, interview Jan 01

5. Don't micro-manage. You don't have time to handle every detail. That's why you have so many people in your squadron.
6. Have high expectations of your senior NCO's. Hold their feet to the fire and ensure they are earning the title "senior NCO" every day by upholding high standards and leading troops.
7. Integrate the core values into your squadron every day. If you expect your troops to live by these – you must. I once had a commander who made reference to the core values in every corrective action he took – it was very effective.⁴

If there is a central theme in all of the essays I received, it is the expectation that commanders live the core values every day. While accomplishing this might appear simple, it takes continuous effort to ensure you never make a decision or take action which might give the impression (even unintentionally) that you are compromising these core values.

What do You Expect?

“No one can make you feel inferior without your permission”

-- Eleanor Roosevelt

To complete our discussion on expectations, we must explore perhaps the most difficult question to answer – what should you expect from the command experience? A squadron command tour is equal parts inspiration and aggravation – times of exhilaration and times of depression. It is all encompassing and becomes pervasive in every aspect of your life. Decisions will often be gut wrenching and unclear. Your people will at times

both inspire you and disappoint you. It will be, for many, the first time you are responsible for areas you don't truly understand, i.e. outside your stovepipe and comfort zone.

Maj Gen John Meyer wrote an outstanding book entitled, *Company Command – the Bottom Line* (you need a copy). In his book, he outlines the following key questions that aptly describe the command experience:

1. Are you willing to dedicate yourself 24 hours a day, seven days a week, if necessary, for your unit and your troops?
2. Is your family willing to bear the sacrifices?
3. Are you willing to lead by example in everything you do – to live in a fish bowl with your personal and professional life open to view?
4. Do you understand that loyalty is a two-way street?
5. Can you challenge your troops to go the extra mile, knowing the challenges may increase, even though the rewards remain the same?
6. Are you willing to put your neck on the line and take risks when necessary?
7. Are you willing to make the tough decisions, regardless of the consequences?
8. Are you willing to take responsibility for everything that happens, or doesn't happen, in your unit?
9. Are you willing to support your boss completely and wholeheartedly, even if he or she is not a person you like?
10. Are you willing to sacrifice your career to protect and preserve the dignity of your troops?⁵

If your answers to these questions are “yes” then you can expect to enjoy the single most rewarding professional experience of your career.

⁴ Schloemer, Christopher, SMSgt, USAF, interview, Jan 01

⁵ *Company Command – the Bottom Line*, Maj Gen John Meyer. P. 8

Chapter 2

Vision and Environment

"In the end, commanders do only two things – provide the vision and set the environment. Almost everything you do for the organization falls into one of these categories. You will be tempted to focus elsewhere. If you do so, it is likely you are performing someone else's job and they neither want nor need your help."

-- Col Steve Goldfein
1st Fighter Wing Commander

You were not hired to “tread water” in command. Rather, you are expected to move your squadron in a direction that more effectively accomplishes the mission. This is true regardless of whether you are taking charge of a top-notch unit or one that’s on its back. Even the very best units can and will improve under the leadership of an inspirational commander. In fact, one of the fundamental reasons the Air Force changes commanders every two years is to continue to bring new ideas and new energy to organizations. Developing a clear vision and then communicating that vision effectively are essential elements of successful command.

Developing Your Vision

“I am interested in the future because that’s where I plan to spend the rest of my life”

-- Maj Gen (ret) Perry Smith

Add one year from your change of command day and ask yourself where you want the squadron to be. Lt Gen (ret) Everett Pratt, former Vice Commander of USAFE, advised his new commanders to make a detailed list of those items they wanted to accomplish in their first year. I found this exercise to be extremely useful for organizing my thoughts into a coordinated gameplan and a focused effort. This list then becomes the foundation of your vision – your commander's intent.

The next step is to combine this list of items you want to accomplish into a basic *vision statement*. Remember, your airmen want and need to be led from day one of your command tour. Knowing where their commander wants to take them is both comforting and reassuring. Here are some basic guidelines to developing your vision statement:

1. Make it **understandable** – it must be understood by the entire squadron. Ensure it is clear, concise, and easy to remember.
2. Make it **inclusive** – look over every aspect of your squadron and ensure no section is left out of your vision.
3. Make it **supportive** – remember, your squadron is responsible for executing a portion of the wing's mission. As such, your vision must support the group and wing.
4. Encourage **buy-in** – avoid the tendency to “issue” your vision. Allow senior supervisors to comment and tweak the vision statement before it is published. Their buy-in will flow down through the unit and help it to take solid root.

Here are a couple examples of vision statements to help you develop your own:

1. When my brother, Col Steve Goldfein stood up an AEF at Kwang Ju, he had airmen assigned from ten different PACAF bases with people going in as many directions. To get everyone aligned he developed the following five-phase program: *reception and beddown, force security, C3, mission continuation, and leaving the place better than we find it – do one before moving to the next.*

2. My predecessor in command, Lt Col Guy Dahlbeck, had done a marvelous job transforming the squadron from a relatively new unit into a showplace for the wing. I determined that my role was to build on his excellent work and focus on rapid mobility in keeping with the move to an Expeditionary Air Force. As such, our vision became *“arrive on time, with the right tools, the right training, and the right attitude to get the job done right the first time – Nickel standard”*.

Communicating Your Vision

" Without vision the people will perish"

-- Proverbs 29:18

Once you have developed your vision, you must then communicate it throughout the squadron. Take and make every opportunity to talk to your troops about your vision and their role in it. It should become the centerpiece of a "mini-speech" you give when meeting with members of the squadron. Here are a few key organizations you can use (or develop if required) to assist in facilitating communication flow within the squadron:

1. **Flight Commander Forum** – most squadrons are organized such that every airman is assigned to one of your flight commanders. Establish a forum with just you and your subordinate commanders to discuss issues related to the squadron. Allow them to make input into the vision statement and direction. Their support is essential to success.
2. **Top 3 (or 4)** – meet with your senior NCO's within the first few days of taking command. Establish clearly that you intend to meet with them on a regular basis to discuss issues facing the squadron.

Again, work to get their buy-in and recruit them to help communicate your vision and intent to the troops.

3. **Airman's Advisory Council** – this is a superb forum for offering younger airmen the opportunity to raise issues directly with the commander as well as hear from you. Not only work to get their commitment to supporting your vision, also use the forum to check communication flow throughout the squadron. Did your direction at the last staff meeting make it out? Ask and see.
4. **Spouse Support Group** – our families exhibit a special kind of courage when they endure the long hours, the separations, and the hardships so common to our service. We owe it to these unsung heroes to ensure they are informed about squadron activities and to make them feel part of the unit's mission. Share your vision with them – they deserve to know and you want their involvement.

By taking the time to first develop and then communicate your vision to the squadron, you will begin your command tour with a clear sense of direction and purpose. The next step is to build the environment in the squadron to achieve your vision.

Building the Environment

“Learn from the mistakes of others. You won’t live long enough to make them all yourself”

-- Martine Fanbee

Every day more than 95% of your airmen will arrive at work intending to succeed -- very few come in with the intent to fail. Your role as commander is to build an environment within the squadron with as few barriers as possible to achieving this already sought after success. As such, the work area must be secure, safe, of high standard, and respectful of diversity.

The most challenging aspect of building this environment will be establishing open and engaged communication flow within the unit. As the commander, you must be an *active* and *engaged* listener. Do you maintain eye contact when people are talking? Do you ask questions to clarify their positions? Do you encourage diversity of opinions on issues? Can you summarize a complex discussion into logical points at the end of a staff meeting? All of these are essential characteristics of an active listener. Not only must you set the example as a commander, you must mentor your key supervisors to do the same. After you have given direction in a staff meeting, wait a few days and then ask a few airmen if they have heard the guidance. You'll often be disappointed in what you find. Go back to the top and start again. It takes constant vigilance throughout your command tour to keep information and ideas flowing daily. In almost every case study presented here, as well as virtually every mishap board you will ever be involved in, at some point a breakdown in communication will be causal. Work at improving communication every day until you give up command.

Here is a story from Lt Col Jeff Lofgren, commander of an F-16 Fighter Squadron that highlights a lesson he shares about listening to key supervisors:

The time and place: May 1999 at Misawa AB, Japan

We had just returned from a deployment to the desert and were facing a PACAF inspection in two months. The orderly room had not deployed and was expected to have completed all inspection preparation while we were gone – this had not happened. I called a meeting to discuss orderly room issues and to review where we were in preparation for the upcoming inspection. At the end of the discussion, one of the SSgt's brought up the fact that he was conducting ERGO testing and requested to be allowed to return to work in the squadron in athletic gear since he was driving back and forth a great deal (15 minutes each way). I asked the

NCOIC of the orderly room his opinion. He was taken aback by the question but responded that it would in fact help if the SSgt could come back to the squadron. I then asked if anyone had brought up the uniform attire as an issue. My first sergeant said the chief had commented on the fact that the SSgt had been in the squadron in workout attire. I did NOT listen very well at this point. My shirt said he had already spoken with the NCOIC and resolved the issue – he was hinting big and I wasn't listening! I was running late so I made a hasty decision I thought was no big deal and authorized the SSgt to wear athletic gear while accomplishing ERGO testing. Big mistake.

Later that afternoon my shirt came into my office and shut the door. Being the ultimate professional, he asked "may I speak frankly with you sir? You really messed up this morning." Right then all the subtle comments became clear. He proceeded to tell me that my chief had already resolved the issue by directing the shirt to instruct the NCOIC that the SSgt would not be allowed to wear athletic gear in the squadron. After discussing the issue with the NCOIC, the matter appeared closed. The SSgt's felt they had won a small victory by undermining the authority of the senior NCO's.

My lessons were very clear. When your senior NCO's speak, you need to listen to them first and foremost. When the shirt mentioned that the chief had spoken on the issue, bells should have gone off. Next, my shirt had already handled the issue, told me so, and I trumped him – not a good thing to undermine his authority in front of subordinates. As a commander, you must listen to your senior NCO's who are central to good order and discipline within your unit. This seemingly small issue turned out to haunt me for many months until I could reorganize the orderly room.

Along with continuous work on communication, you must build a team by developing key relationships within (and outside) your squadron. As the senior enlisted manager, your senior chief is your main spokesman on all issues pertaining to the enlisted force. You must talk openly and often. Think of the relationship as much like that of a

father and son. To succeed, you must be mature enough to realize that while you are often the father, sometimes you are the son.⁶

Make it a point to never sign any paper associated with an enlisted issue before the chief gets a vote. Walk around the squadron with your chief so the troops see you together often. Listen to his/her advice. It will benefit you and your squadron if the troops know the chief has your ear and is a respected advisor. As a young commander, you may feel a bit intimidated by a chief with 18-23 years in the service. Remember – in the end it is your squadron. You have several years of solid experience in the Air Force yourself and it is what you do today with the experience you have that matters.⁷ Never forget that the leadership skills you have developed up to this point in your career (which impressed your boss enough to hire you for command) are not tribe or specialty specific. The basics of solid leadership you used to motivate and lead officers as a flight commander will now apply to leading airmen (and visa versa). Developing the right relationship with your chief is crucial to your success.

The next relationship you must develop is between your first sergeant ("shirt") and the chief. Often the lines of responsibility between these two individuals will cross paths. It is essential that you lay out your expectations early so that these key advisors are in sync and in support of your vision. As a general rule, when you are working a discipline or personnel issue involving other base agencies, (JAG, Family Support, etc.) the shirt will be your primary advisor. However, no action should be taken with an airman in the squadron before the chief gets an input. On the other hand, when there are mission related issues taking place with the enlisted force, the chief will be your primary advisor. Once

⁶ Goldfein, Steve, Col, USAF, interview, Jan 98

again, the shirt must be *in the know* before action is taken to ensure he/she is not blind-sided when counseling members of the squadron. It is all about *communication*. These two individuals must communicate openly and daily to ensure neither works against the other and both work together for you. By laying out these expectations to them early, you will begin your tour with a solid base of senior NCO support and teamwork.

The final key team inside the squadron I will discuss is the one between key supervisory officers who have conflicting interests. I'll use a typical fighter squadron as an example and discuss the relationship between the operations officer and the maintenance officer. The operations officer is responsible for training the pilots/aircrew while the maintenance officer is responsible for managing the fleet. To build a healthy team spirit in these often-conflicting requirements, lay out your expectations to the two of them clearly. The operations officer has a responsibility to the maintenance officer to lay out the value of whatever it is he is asking for. This is important because the maintenance officer is going to have to explain the plan to his staff. The maintenance officer owes the operations officer the cost of what he is asking in terms of workload and impact on the long-term health of the fleet. The operations officer needs to understand this cost in order to explain it to his staff. Once both the *value* and the *cost* are clearly understood by both sides, reasonable men and women can reach informed decisions that balance each competing interest while accomplishing the mission. The key ingredient for success is engaged interaction by both sides. Finally, when they cannot agree, you must make the decision. Before you do, have them explain the value and cost as indicated above. You will likely find that a few sessions with you going through this process will help them

⁷ *Company Command – the Bottom Line*, Meyer, John G. (Alexandria: Byrd Enterprises, 1996) p. 31

communicate more effectively. This process can be applied to any squadron where equipment and facilities issues run counter to training agendas.

The most critical team you must develop outside your squadron is between you and your fellow squadron commanders. Make appointments in the first few weeks to visit them on their turf. Get to know the civil engineering commander before you have to ask for her help. Remember Col Lord's advice in his letter about viewing your fellow commanders as "the competition". Do not let healthy competition turn into open animosity. As commander, you will set the tone. Never degrade or criticize other squadrons as commander. Do so and you violate your loyalty to them as fellow commanders. Remember that weak organizations need another unit, usually a better one, to define who they are and what they stand for as a squadron. Define who you are internally rather than externally. In doing so, yours may well become the squadron other units will emulate.

Here is a superb story from Lt Col Jim Jones, commander of an F-16 Fighter squadron at Osan AB, Korea that highlights teambuilding, listening, and building key relationships:

The time and place: Jun 1999 at Osan AB, RK

As I stood in front of the squadron during my change of command ceremony, I was confident I was prepared to command as any officer could expect to be. I had extensive flying experience in the aircraft and had spent the previous thirteen months as the operations officer of the same squadron. I felt I had the big issues under control, but I quickly learned that some of the items I considered minor issues could have major repercussions.

When I took command, the maintenance personnel were operating on a three-shift concept. My maintenance supervisors were confident this was the most effective way to keep the fleet combat ready plus it enabled them to stabilize the work schedules for personnel on the line. Instead of tying work schedules to the flying period, they were able to offer relatively stable work hours for our airmen, which was a significant quality of life issue. Sounded great in principle, but unfortunately, it was not in accordance with current regulations. As we were in the zone for a higher headquarters inspection, I had to decide whether we were going to continue with three-shift operations or realign the schedule to conform to PACAF's standard two-shift maintenance guidance.

I did some basic research on the regulation and then discussed the issue with the PACAF/LG staff. They gave me a number of reasons why the three-shift operations were a bad idea – manning shortfalls, lack of supervision, tendency to pass work to the next shift, etc. While they acknowledged there were isolated situations that may require three shifts, they presented very convincing arguments that this wasn't the best way to accomplish maintenance on a routine basis. As I saw it, the issue seemed relatively simple. Could we maintain the aircraft in the same manner and accomplish the mission in accordance with the regulations or did we truly need to maintain three-shift operations? I asked my maintenance supervision and they indicated that we certainly could meet mission requirements with two shifts but at the cost in efficiency and the quality of life benefits previously mentioned. After some thought, I elected to stop three-shift operations as a standard practice, while maintaining the option to flex when circumstances dictated the need to do so.

While I believe the decision was correct and I would make the same decision today, the *way* I handled the situation turned out to have negative repercussions. My maintenance supervisors were extremely talented, experienced, and capable. This wasn't a decision they had come to by chance. They were confident they were doing what was best for the squadron, and when I told them I had discussed this with PACAF, they felt I didn't trust their judgment. I failed to realize how important this issue was to them. As a result, I didn't get them involved in the decision process, as I should have. Rather than going to the PACAF staff alone, I should have included my maintenance supervision in the discussion. When the maintenance supervision wanted to discuss my rationale for going to two-shift operations, I felt I knew all of the counter arguments so cut off the discussion with a curt, "because that is what the regs say we need to do". I should have spent more time listening and understanding my maintenance supervisors concerns and then included them in the final decision. The result of all of this was a perception among my senior NCO's that *the boss*

didn't trust or value their opinion. A perceived lack of trust can lead to all sorts of problems. Had I taken the time to treat this issue as a team building exercise rather than a solo commander decision, we could have resolved the situation to everyone's satisfaction and emerged stronger as a squadron.⁸

The last thought on building the environment for success involves development of a "*winning spirit*" – a general recognition that despite the mission or level of competition, your squadron is up to the task. This is not something that happens overnight. A new commander at Shaw AFB took over a unit that had not won a single award in the two years previous to his change of command. He began with his senior staff focusing on winning the quarterly FOD award. Once they accomplished this task, they moved on to others – always focused on *team* rather than *individual* accomplishment. In the course of one year, the squadron was winning every competition on base. Morale soared as airmen recognized they were part of a winning team. It took a focused effort and diligence on the part of the commander to nurture this spirit in a way that still balanced his loyalty to both his fellow commanders and the airmen in his squadron.

While building an environment for success, you will not win every competition nor accomplish every task. There will be times when you will fall short both individually and as a unit. The best advice for handling not only setbacks but also achievement comes from Don Shula, the "winningest" coach in NFL history. Coach Shula had a 24-hour rule. He allowed himself, his coaches, and his players a maximum of 24-hours to celebrate a

⁸ Jones, Jim, Lt Col, USAF, interview, Feb 01

victory or bemoan a defeat. Once the 24 hours was up, they put it behind them and focused their energies on the next opponent.⁹

Developing your vision, communicating your vision, and then building the environment necessary for success should take up the majority of your time and energy as a commander.

⁹ *The Heart of a Leader*, Ken Blanchard, (Tulsa, OK: Honor Books, 1999), p. 19

Chapter 3

Walking the Walk

"With two-thousand years of examples behind us we have no excuse, when fighting, for not fighting well"

-- Lawrence of Arabia

Here are several stories from commanders who faced daunting challenges during their tours. They are provided, as case studies in order to offer insight into some of the challenges you will face. As previously mentioned, read them with a critical eye and think now about how you will handle similar circumstances.

The first involves a situation where the fundamental ethics of a commander were tested. Here is Col Terry New's tale:

The time and place: December 1993, Aviano AB, Italy

As the commander of the 512th Fighter Squadron stationed at Ramstein AB, Germany, we deployed to Aviano for the 86th Wing's first participation in Operation DENY FLIGHT. The ground war in Bosnia was fairly intense at that point and escalating with all sides trying to get their last licks in before winter. NATO airpower was providing 24-hour coverage over Bosnia, not only denying flight, but also providing a deterrent close air support presence for UN forces on the ground trying to mediate the conflict.

I led the deployment sortie to Aviano where the 31st Wing Commander and staff met us with a warm reception. There was a lot of media coverage including an interview as soon as my feet hit the ground. After a fair amount of gripping and grinning, I was invited to attend the wing standup where I was welcomed as one of their own. Up to this point, I was riding pretty high – first deployment as a squadron commander,

about to fly our first combat missions, and a grand welcome by the 31st Fighter Wing. But when I returned to the squadron facility, my operations officer was waiting for me outside. “Boss, we need to talk. We’ve got a problem”.

He had led the ADVON team down a few days prior and this was my first opportunity to talk with him since arrival. Our problem was that we had planned to load 500 lb. Mark 82 bombs for the following day’s schedule and expected a fuse that my weapons troops were certified to load. Problem was, these fuses did not exist at Aviano. So here we were, deployed for combat operations and we were not certified to load our primary air-to-ground munitions. The leadership at the Combined Air Operations Center (CAOC) in Vicenza was furious and demanded we “do whatever it takes” to fly our tasking the next day.

We found my maintenance supervisor on the flightline and discussed options. He gave me an “out” by saying that although the weapons loaders were not certified to load the other fuses, they had done it before and would have no trouble doing it now for combat. They were leaning way forward and would do it if I gave the word. Those UN forces were depending on us to be overhead in case they needed help.

I tried to simplify the facts in my mind in order to make the right decision. Our site survey team had obviously done a poor job of determining the fuse inventory at Aviano. My “combat ready” squadron I was so proud of was not so “combat ready” and in fact, we had egg all over our face. I had an O-6 at the CAOC speaking directly to the 2-star telling me to do “whatever it takes” to make our schedule the next day. And I had my maintenance supervision, who felt bad about not discovering the fuse requirement, reassuring me they could load those bombs and fuses even though they were not certified to do so. All I had to do was give the word.

I thought back on what I had told the squadron was my priorities at my first commander’s call and what I expected them to use as their priorities when making difficult decisions. Number one, ask yourself how this decision will affect our ability to do our mission. I had no doubt we could safely load the bombs and carry out combat operations the next day. But we’d be doing it in direct violation of Air Force Instructions. If anything went wrong, I wouldn’t have a leg to stand on. Number two, ask yourself how this decision will affect our people. I felt they had already fulfilled their obligation by giving me an honest appraisal of where we stood. Any repercussions would be borne solely by me. It would probably even boost morale a bit for the troops to see the boss stick his neck out to preserve our squadron’s reputation. Bottom line – I felt I could justify my

decision either way based on my first two priorities. Number three, if you can't make the decision based on the first two, just do the right thing. So much for black and white decisions. All eyes were on me and they were waiting for a decision. Whatever I told them would demonstrate how I expected them to conduct themselves, not only as a member of the squadron, but throughout their Air Force careers. It suddenly became clear to me what to do.

I told them we were not going to load the bombs without certified loaders. We rolled up our sleeves and determined what it would take to get our loaders certified. I called my OG back at Ramstein and told him what I had done and asked for help. He scrambled a C-21 with a certified weapons load crew and instructor on board and they were at Aviano in a matter of hours. He instructed and certified my weapons loaders while they loaded our first jet – legally. We met our tasking the next day and every day after that. My OG/CC and I jumped in a car and drove to the CAOC for an audience with the General and the Colonel. Now that tempers had calmed and we were flying combat missions, the general made it very plain, “don't let it happen again”.

I've thought about this situation many times since then. I wouldn't do anything different. This event also has some leadership lessons at the next level of command because my commander saved my back end. He never once questioned my decision and went to extraordinary lengths to bail me out of a difficult situation. Once he brought the cavalry to the rescue, he could have jumped back on that C-21 and gone home. He chose instead to go with me to Vicenza to provide top cover and did most of the apologizing for me. Talk about how to win someone's respect – I'd work for him again any day!¹⁰

This story also highlights an important part of command decision making -- learning to trust your gut. You have been placed in command because others already trust your instincts to make solid decisions. When you find yourself favoring a course of action because you think someone else might be smarter than you, step back a moment. If your gut tells you its wrong, don't go there. Many commanders at every level can tell plenty of stories of poor decisions they made that went against their gut instincts – and they knew

¹⁰ New, Terry, Col, USAF, interview, Feb 01

it. Chances are, the longer you are in command, the more you will find these gut checks to be superb decision guides.

A great deal has been written about leadership and management and the difference between the two. I am going to use an over-simplified definition useful for our discussion of command -- *leadership is about people and management is about things*. Successful commanders understand they are equally responsible for both. Surely, purists will find fault with this definition, but it does offer a way to separate and discuss your responsibilities. As a commander, you will be placed in charge of both people and things (aircraft, vehicles, parts, etc.) and must balance your time between both areas of responsibility. Commanders that feel they can simply focus on leadership and not sweat the details of management have never seen what goes into the phase inspection of an aircraft or managed the supply requirements to keep a fleet of aging vehicles running in a transportation squadron. Commanders that believe they can focus just on managing the pieces and parts have never choreographed and led 100 aircraft into a heavily defended enemy target or made a gut-wrenching decision to relieve an incompetent subordinate. The bottom line – a successful commander balances his time between both leadership and management responsibilities.

You must get down deep enough into the organization to understand the key processes required to accomplish the mission. How can you engage to solve a supply problem if you don't understand how your people do their jobs? Don't believe you are empowering your people and avoiding micromanagement by neglecting to what is required (both integral to the squadron and outside) to accomplish your squadron's mission. A blind and/or ignorant eye is not the same as empowerment.

New commanders are sometimes hesitant to ask questions of subordinates for fear of appearing uninformed and losing respect. Remember, you have been chosen for command because of your demonstrated leadership abilities. You will garner far more respect from your airmen if you take the time early in your tour to understand their part in achieving your vision. Can you think of a single instance during your career when a commander has asked you to explain what you do or how you do it and you were bothered by the intrusion? Chances are you appreciated the fact that he or she took the time to ask your opinion. Your airmen will be no different. They don't expect immediate tactical or technical expertise in every area. However, they do expect you to understand how they fit into the big picture so you can be a credible advocate.

Here is a story from Lt Col Charlie Lyon, commander of the 22nd Fighter Squadron at Spangdahlem about a lesson he learned about paying attention to the details:

The time and place – March 1999 at Spangdahlem AB, Germany

This was a great lesson for me in what happens if you don't check all the details as a commander. While the squadron was deployed to Incirlik, Turkey, in support of Operation NORTHERN WATCH (ONW), my life support officer was attending a school in the states. He returned to the squadron just before Operation ALLIED FORCE began.

We quickly redeployed the squadron to home station, finding out during our refueling stop at NAS Sigonella, that our destination was Spangdahlem—not Aviano—adding a new twist to our upcoming tasking by flying out of home station with pilots who had not yet participated in ALLIED FORCE. Within 48 hours of arrival at Spangdahlem, we were airborne for our first ALLIED FORCE combat missions, with a mix of pilots who had spent the previous months deployed to ONW, and others who had remained at home station during the deployment.

When we received the execute order, this young officer was included in the lineup. After his second mission, he was extremely shaken up--after being launched on by enemy surface to air missiles (on both missions). I learned from his flight commander that he was extremely hesitant to fly again the following night. Once I looked into the details, I found out this kid (who had only been mission ready for a couple of months) had only flown one or two night sorties TOTAL since being at Spangdahlem. So, we gave him a couple simulator hops and rotated him to Aviano to fly daytime missions before working him back into the night rotation.

Looking back, this young pilot had more courage than the rest of us by flying in missions he hadn't been properly trained to do. Was he current and qualified to perform the mission? Yes. Was he the right choice to fly one of the missions early on? No. I let him down by placing him in a position he never should have been in – because I never checked the details.¹¹

A critical aspect of successful command will be taking care of your troops. Here is a story from Lt Col Mike Boera, commander of the 23rd Fighter Squadron at Spangdahlem that highlights the importance of putting this high on your priority list:

The time and place – December 1996 at Karup, Denmark

I was lucky enough to learn a great lesson on leadership and taking care of my troops while serving as Operations Officer of the “Big 22” Fighter Squadron flying F-16’s. I was the detachment commander for a tactical fighter weaponry deployment to Karup, Denmark. Our deployed maintenance team was already in place along with our advance team of operations personnel. As the deployment leader, I eagerly looked forward to this opportunity to get away from the office, the email terminal, and the headaches to fly, learn, and have a great time. All the jets were down safely and I was met at the plane with a cold beer by one of the younger troops. I had an all-star team of performers with me so I wasn’t at all worried about being ready to go the next day. Time to have some fun.

Luckily, I had a superstar sortie generation element chief, SMSgt Ted Paget, who tactfully “let me have it”. He pulled me aside on day two

¹¹ Lyon, Charlie, Col, USAF, interview, Jan 01

and told me I had messed up bigtime by not checking on the troops first. I should have asked about the barracks. How is the chow? How is the transportation to and from the airfield? How are the maintenance facilities? Turns out they were all fine because I had a professional SNCO “checking my six” and ensuring the troops were cared for.

The first impression of me as a commander quite frankly stunk. Luckily, because of SMSgt Paget’s timely guidance, I was able to rebound and become a better leader for the remainder of the deployment. Abraham Lincoln said, “I can make a general in five minutes, but it will take me years to come up with 100 good horses.” As a commander, you better take care of the horses. I will never have to be reminded again.¹²

Undoubtedly one of the most difficult situations you may face is handling unit failure. What do you do if the entire organization fails? Here is a story from Col Lansen Conley about just such a situation he faced as a maintenance squadron commander:

The time and place – May 1996 at Aviano AB, Italy

I commanded the 31st Maintenance Squadron (MXS) at Aviano AB, Italy. It was a large squadron of about 600 people responsible for several in-shop maintenance functions along with munitions storage and handling. For everyone in the munitions business, nuclear surety inspections (NSI’s) strike fear into the hearts of everyone involved. They are exacting inspections requiring months of preparation and practice – failure is not an option.

For months prior to the NSI, we worked to ensure we were prepared – long hours, endless checks and rechecks. Thankfully – we passed the NSI. A month and a half later, HQ USAFE scheduled us for a conventional munitions stockpile verification audit. When my boss, the logistics group commander, inquired about the nature of this audit, my munitions specialists said it was not graded and therefore low threat. Consequently, we did not spend a great deal of time preparing for the audit and I was assured we were ready. When the inspectors finished, we were labeled the “worst in USAFE” – a shock to everyone. Needless to say the

¹² Col (s) Mike Boera, interview, Jan 01

shock wave went all the way up the chain to HQ USAFE. It took months of endless hours to fix and pass a re-inspection.

We had some serious mismanagement problems to fix caused by failure to follow established procedures. I fired some supervisors, moved some to new positions, and hired a few new folks. Our young airmen had to work long and hard to correct deficiencies that didn't just occur overnight – it was a long standing problem of bad practices and not following the book.

What did I learn from this? First – no inspection is benign. Never let your people tell you “not to worry” when higher headquarters inspection teams are in town.

Second – be the commander from Missouri with the “show me” approach. As one of my bosses would say, “trust but verify”. This is especially true if the inspection is in an area where you don't have technical expertise. Ask all those “stupid” questions because while you are getting educated, it might trigger one of your experts in an area that needs to be checked. Invite experts in from another base on your nickel to get an outside opinion. We did this for the re-inspection and it paid big dividends.

Third – ensure your senior supervisors know they are accountable. They need to know their areas cold. When they tell you they are ready for inspection, you expect them to be ready by the book – not according to how they “feel”.

Fourth – if you get to stay on the job and fix the problem, be aggressive. Develop a get well plan complete with a timeline and brief it up the chain. Figure out who to hold accountable and do so. Stay engaged and take the recovery on as a unit task.

Fifth and finally – always be the leader. Take responsibility for the failure and get out front of the recovery. Bad inspection results are no fun, but if you rally the squadron to overcome it as a unit, you will emerge stronger for it.¹³

As a commander, you must take your mission but not yourself very seriously. The final story in this section comes from Col Daniel "Doc" Zoerb, one of the most talented

¹³ Conley, Lanson, Col, USAF, interview, Dec 00

officers I have ever known. It offers some thoughts to ponder on the importance of *humility* as a commander:

The time and place – Early 1980’s, Eglin AFB, Fla.

There we were, forty-five of the USAF’s very finest NCO’s, hand-picked from throughout TAC, two of the world’s most gorgeous brand new air superiority fighters on alert with four outside ready and waiting for the first opportunity to fight. The unit quickly becomes operational and a political showplace – a model for tactical fighter employment and maintenance. A jewel in terms of facilities, and the first stop on any senior leader or politician’s tour. Young Capt. Zoerb in his first command is approached by his old CMSgt one afternoon and asked for a minute of the commander’s time behind closed doors. Into the commander’s office they go, the chief carrying a glass of water. With the door closed, the chief, using his standard south Georgia drawl asks the captain if he “would mind stickin’ his fanger in this here glass of water”. In a busy, condescending way, the captain agrees and puts a finger in the glass. The old chief takes a few seconds to inspect the water with the captain’s finger stuck in it up to the knuckle, then asks him to remove the finger. The chief continues examining the glass of water and the now removed dripping finger and says, “hhriumphh . . . just what I thought”, excuses himself and leaves the office, never saying another word about the event . . . ever. Dismissing the event as rather strange, but of no significance, the commander struts out, gathers flying gear, and becomes the star of the day’s practice scramble demonstration for a group of visiting State representatives.

0200 that night, out of a sound sleep that night, the meaning of the chief’s strange behavior is realized – you court disaster when you start believing your own “stuff” or the “stuff” others are saying or writing about you or your organization.

There are a lot of reasons why organizations succeed or fail, and seldom is the intellect, experience, or leadership of a single individual the sole reason for either. It is dangerous to believe that a particular leadership style, or that your particular characteristics represent an infallible formula for success. Humility, recognition of the indispensable role played by each member of the team, flexibility/adaptability of leadership to current or anticipated environment, and an ability and willingness to take advantage of new or fleeting opportunities make command a constant and dynamic

challenge – and really hard work. We named our son Jacob after CMSgt (ret) Allison Jacobs . . . finest chief I ever knew.¹⁴

Clearly this story highlights the notion that leaders with humility don't "think less of themselves – they just think of themselves less."¹⁵

¹⁴ Zoerb, Daniel, Col, USAF, interview, Nov 2000

¹⁵ *The Heart of a Leader*, Ken Blanchard (Tulsa, OK: Honor Books, 1999) p. 46

Chapter 4

Handling Justice

" A leader must be able to look a man in the eye when he fires him and weep for him at the same time"

-- Vice Admiral (ret) James Stockdale

Much has been written about commanders and the *law* but relatively little has been written about commanders and *justice*. Guess which one you are ultimately responsible for? Because it will take up so much of your time as a commander and because getting it right is so critical to success, I have devoted an entire chapter to the process of handling justice in your squadron. What follows is not the "approved solution". Rather, here are some thoughts on a process of justice for your consideration as you develop your own methods as commander.

Military discipline, handled with fairness, timeliness, and compassion, is always positive. This is a very important statement so I will repeat it – *military discipline, handled with fairness, timeliness, and compassion, is always positive*. Now it may not feel very positive to the individual involved at the time, but when handled correctly, the squadron, the Air Force, and often the individual will benefit. Fairly managed and timely discipline can significantly boost morale in a unit. Conversely, poorly managed discipline will severely undermine your credibility and capacity to lead effectively.

When a subordinate in your squadron fails (or appears to fail) in the performance of his/her duties, take the time to ask yourself and key supervision four key questions:

1. Did the individual have a clear understanding of the task?
2. Did the individual have the required tools?
3. Did the individual have the required training?
4. Did the individual have the required professional working environment?

If you find the answer to any of these questions is “no” then you and/or someone in the supervisory chain bear some portion of the responsibility for failure. Remember that creating the environment for success is your job and you should work aggressively to fix the problem. If the answers to all of these questions are “yes”, then you need to hold the individual accountable and take appropriate action.

Look at your discipline process as a unique opportunity for mentoring subordinates in a very personal setting. By making the process as **inclusive** as possible (without denying the individual appropriate privacy), you will have an opportunity to meet with airmen and NCO’s in private settings and teach them your philosophy of leadership. Most disciplinary situations, including those that involve the JAG, should involve an individual’s entire chain of supervision.

Your first step will be to gather together as many facts as possible. Rarely will you have to make split second decisions in cases of discipline. Be patient and get all of the facts before you take any action. Not only will this ensure you act based on the best information available, it will also help you avoid an unfair decision when emotions are high. Your first sergeant will be the best source for fact-finding in most cases.

With as many facts as possible on the table, study the information until you can walk through the case chronologically in your mind. Work with the first sergeant to ensure you understand the intricacies involved. Realize that you will seldom get all of the facts. You just need to be able to walk through the chronology of events in order to form an initial opinion on which way to proceed. Keep this opinion between you and your shirt.

Generally, the next decision you must make is the appropriate level to handle the problem. As a general rule, pushing discipline down to the lowest possible level is advisable. When an airman walks into the commander's office for discipline, it should be a significant emotional event. Ensure the cases you handle are appropriate for commander involvement. With the exception of officers that work directly for you, any discipline below a letter of reprimand (LOR) should be handled at a lower level. If you choose to handle every case, even in small squadrons, you not only demean the appropriate authority of your office, you also deny subordinate supervisors the opportunity to lead. In cases where you can delegate the disciplinary responsibility, serve as an advisor and mentor to the subordinate supervisor as he or she handles the case.

Once a situation is deemed appropriate for your direct oversight and involvement, call in the supervision of the individual including everyone from his or her immediate supervisor through the chief, flight commander, etc. Remember, as you work through this case, one of your objectives is to mentor everyone in the room. At the first meeting, lay out the facts as you know them (from memory if possible). It will be immediately apparent that you've done your homework and you understand the specifics. If the case

involves a young airman, the senior airman and staff sergeant supervisors will see that you take discipline seriously – this fact will get out to the squadron quickly.

Once the chronological facts of the case have been reviewed, explain to all that the purpose of this meeting is for you to hear their thoughts on the case and get their answer to a single crucial question – *is this individual a keeper or not*. Make a solemn point that as a commander you carry two tool bags. One is labeled “*rehabilitation*” and the other is labeled “*removal from the Air Force*”. Before any steps are taken, you need their honest assessment and advice as to which tool bag to open. Make a point that you take their comments seriously and want to know if they are prepared to continue to work with the individual in question. Start with the lowest ranking member present and work up the chain (note -- don't go in reverse if you want the senior airman to speak openly). Let everyone speak his or her piece. Pay close attention to the lowest ranking supervisor. Not only does he/she know the individual best, it may be the first time they have been faced with a supervisory issue. Remember, as you work toward a fair discipline solution, you are using this opportunity to teach. Keep the meeting disciplined and serious. Cut off any and all inappropriate levity among the supervisors present. Joking about the case will undermine your intent and give the impression that the process is more show than substance. Take your own notes as everyone comments but don't agree or disagree with anyone in the room. Ask questions intended solely to ensure you understand clearly the position of the individual speaking. Finally, keep the meeting focused on the individual and the case. Cut off any sidebars or conversations that veer from your intended purpose. When everyone has spoken, refer to your notes and summarize each person's viewpoint. Again, begin with the lowest ranking member, spend the most time on his or her

comments – you want everyone in the room to know that you value their opinion and take their role as supervisor seriously.

The next step is a gut check. If there is clear consensus in the room on the general way ahead and this consensus agrees with your initial opinion (i.e. your gut), you might choose to summarize and move to the next step. If the consensus is for dismissal from the Air Force, there is little more for the group to discuss. Tell those present you intend to include them in the rest of the process, yet the final decision will be yours to make. This is a responsibility of command and one you accept and welcome freely.

Chances are, you already have a military lawyer (JAG) assigned to assist your squadron and the shirt has been in contact with him or her. In working with the JAG, the best advice to remember throughout is as follows: *“lawyers are responsible for the law, but commanders are responsible for justice”*. I have found military lawyers to be professionals who try their best to give sound legal advice. However, I never went to the JAG and asked, “What do I do?” Rather, I went to the JAG with an idea already thought through with my shirt and key supervisors and asked, “How do I accomplish this plan legally and ethically?” With a gameplan already in mind, you will find the JAG to be helpful in ensuring you execute your commander’s intent in accordance with military law. If, on the other hand, you ask the JAG to determine the proper way to handle a case, you will get sound legal advice, but it may not achieve justice for your airman. When removing an individual from the Air Force, the JAG will be a critical asset along with your first sergeant.

If the consensus (including your gut feel) is clearly for rehabilitation, you may choose to open the floor for discussion on the tools available in the rehabilitation tool

bag. A primary purpose is to teach everyone in the room your process for determining just punishment. Lay out the intent and procedures for Letters of Counseling, Admonishment, Reprimand and Article 15. As a new commander, you may feel more comfortable allowing your shirt or the JAG to cover the details of these tools. Believe me, it won't be long before you will be very comfortable covering them yourself, which is preferred.

Once the procedural rules have been covered, go around the room again and ask for opinions on what tool each believes would be appropriate. Same as before – lowest ranking to highest, take notes, offer no opinions, listen actively, and summarize their opinions at the end. Try to determine the best approach to assisting this individual back onto the road to success – the purpose of this tool bag.

Side tip -- ask for opinions on possible additional duty. If the interest is truly on rehabilitation, the focus will be on structuring the time to retrain the individual in the area(s) where he or she fell short. If the discussion veers towards punitive use of this time, you may be in the wrong tool bag. Ensure the supervisors in the room understand that whatever package you ultimately choose, they must remain personally involved throughout the rehabilitative process. Your ultimate long-term goal is to get this airman back on track. Achieving this goal will require the support of everyone in the room. Once you are satisfied they understand their role in the process, end the meeting with a reminder that all discussions relative to the specifics of the case are to remain within the group.

After you dismiss the supervisors, give a copy of your notes to your first sergeant and ask him or her to summarize them in a memo for record for inclusion in the case file.

Your shirt will be ultimately responsible for ensuring the paperwork is correct. Keeping accurate notes throughout will help immensely if any problems occur down the road.

Now it's time to determine where you want to go with the discipline package. Avoid making a quick decision even if you know exactly what you want to do. Sleep on it one night, not only to review your notes and think over what you have heard, but also to avoid the appearance of quickly disregarding the opinion of the supervisors. Once you have made your decision, go over the details with your first sergeant and JAG (if required) to minimize the chances that unintended consequences will occur.

Call the key supervisors back in to tell them your decision. This can be a smaller group but should, at the least, include the people who will be responsible for the rehabilitative program. While you owe no one an explanation of your reasoning, I would advise you to go over the logic you used to come to your decision. Doing so will shed light on your depth as a commander and will allow you to mentor and teach subordinates as you prepare them for greater leadership responsibilities. Once again, advise them to keep all details of this discussion within the group and dictate the time for delivering the punishment to the offender.

There is certainly no approved solution for administering punishment. Much of how you handle this final part of the discipline process will depend on your personality and style. However, here are a few thoughts on effectively ensuring you achieve your goal.

Being disciplined by the commander should be a significant emotional event. You want every airman in your squadron to dread standing on your carpet. Have the individual's supervisors show up five to ten minutes early and stand in the room in a

military manner. Ensure all present understand the solemnity and importance of this session. You must tailor your delivery to ensure the message is concise, serious, formal – and *always professional*. Make no mistake, you have no right to be abusive. Clear your desk of all but the punishment you are passing out – nothing else should be on your mind while he or she is in the room. Have the shirt pre-brief the individual on proper reporting procedures as he marches into the office. Once he reports in, keep him at attention and direct that he look at you. Much of what you say is going to be lost on him. It is the direct eye contact that he will remember. You must prepare before the session so that you can maintain eye contact with minimal referral to your notes and paperwork. It is acceptable to have your shirt read the fine print for the first few sessions until you become more familiar with the wording. You don't want to get into any discussion at this point. This is truly intended to be a one-sided conversation. If the tool bag you chose is removal, end the session and have the individual report to the first sergeant's office. There, the shirt should go over the details of the package in a more relaxed environment in order to ensure the airman clearly understands the details of the path you have chosen.

If the tool you chose is rehabilitation, I found it very effective at the end to order the individual to turn and look at his supervisors. I would then state, "the reason this rehabilitative disciplinary package was chosen is primarily because the leaders you are looking at honestly believe you have the potential to overcome this event and succeed in our Air Force. They are committed to working with you to get you back on track. That being said, none are willing to carry you. We will provide you with the opportunity – it is your job to seize it." Again, avoid any two-way conversation and dismiss the individual to the shirts office for follow-up counseling.

You will find that handling discipline will take up a good portion of your time and energy. It is critical that you get this right. While the methods I suggested are by no means the approved solution, they do serve as a starting point to develop what works for you. The best description of the process I laid out is “tough love”. Remember two critical items in the process:

1. Develop your process as an opportunity to mentor – make it inclusive.
2. In the end, discipline handled fairly is always good and you alone are ultimately responsible for justice.

Here are a couple stories from commanders who faced difficult disciplinary situations. In order to protect privacy, no names or bases are mentioned.

I had a technical sergeant in the squadron who tested positive on a random urinalysis test a couple days after Christmas. Everyone, including me, could not believe he would use marijuana. Nonetheless, the JAG informed me that we must take the case to court-martial because he was an NCO and I had no say in the matter.

Three months elapsed as prosecution made its case and waited for trial. The defense attorney prepared an active defense showing that a level of THC in one’s system could be caused by ingestion of hemp seed oil. This was backed up by scientific evidence that even a teaspoon size amount of this product will trigger the test. His results were at an extremely low level – barely enough to flag the test and conducive to the argument. Additionally, the technical sergeant claimed he had been to a friend’s home for dinner on the night before the test where hemp seed oil was indeed used by the hostess. Both the hostess and her husband filed affidavits to this effect.

The technical sergeant had over forty character references from a variety of people to include the logistics group commander and the top chief master sergeant from our Numbered Air Force.

A couple days before the scheduled court-martial, the JAG came to me with a “deal” they wanted to offer the technical sergeant – bad conduct discharge in lieu of court martial. He would avoid a felony conviction but

be forced to give up a sixteen-year career and have to live with the discharge on his permanent records.

The entire case came back to me because I would have to enforce the discharge. I asked if I could dismiss the case and was told yes, but any commander above me could void the dismissal and send the case directly to trial. If this were to happen, the “deal” would be voided and result in a rather large risk for the sergeant. His attorneys believed the case sat at fifty-fifty for conviction.

I discussed all of the options with the technical sergeant along with his wife and his counsel, reminding him that he could accept the deal, or that I could take the matter for my consideration and either send it to court, discharge him, or dismiss the case. After counsel with his attorney, he elected to let my decision be the final word.

After more than a week to review the case, re-reading all of the evidence presented, I determined that enough reasonable doubt existed to suggest that the defense had made its case. It was an agonizing decision. I did not want to be over-ridden and have this young man face a felony conviction when he could have left with a bad conduct discharge. Happily for the young man, none of the commanders above me reversed the decision. I am confident I made the right decision and the most just outcome was achieved.

Here is another story of an extremely tough situation where the commander had to balance doing what he thought was right with achieving a timely outcome to a difficult case. You may face a decision like this where the cost of continuing a case is too high a price to pay for the unit. There is NOT a right answer – read and think about how you would have handled the situation.

As I took command, I inherited a few discipline situations that were already underway. One involved an office of special investigation (OSI) case against a senior airman who was just months away from a discharge for high year tenure. The investigation revealed that the senior airman, while stationed previously overseas, had sexual relations several times with a minor. As the investigation came to a close, it became clear

that to get a court-martial conviction, we would need testimony from the minor involved.

She was a dependent of a retired master sergeant, still living overseas who had refused permission to fly her back for testimony in the case. As such, the JAG informed me there was no way to win a case against the airman. I chose to approach the wing commander and asked for funds to fly a legal team overseas to gain the testimony. The wing commander agreed.

However, the JAG felt that even with a written statement, we only had a marginal chance for conviction. I asked the JAG to contact the area defense counsel (ADC) and inform him that we not only were intent on gaining the testimony from the minor but we were also prepared to prosecute to the maximum extent possible.

In less than a day, the ADC came back with a deal. He proposed that they seek discharge in lieu of court martial which would result in him being out of the Air Force in 3 days, a lifelong discharge statement that read “in lieu of court martial”, and loss of his high year tenure separation pay (about \$22,000). I opted to allow the discharge and we got him out of the Air Force as quickly as possible.

Unfortunately, the story doesn’t end there. Approximately a year after the discharge, the SrA killed his own daughter and then killed himself during a shootout with police. The question I will forever face is – what would have happened if I had been able to gain a conviction and sent him to prison?

A final thought on handling discipline within the squadron – you must follow up. Once a case is deemed appropriate for your involvement as commander, you should ensure you receive updates on the process to ensure the intended outcome is being achieved. Not only will it ensure your intent is being carried out, it will give you yet one more opportunity to interact with the individual's supervisory chain in a mentoring forum.

Chapter 5

Great Ideas

“Choose work you love and you will never have to work a day in your life”

-- Confucius

" Good thoughts in your head not delivered mean squat"

-- Ken Blanchard

This purpose of this final chapter is to offer you some program ideas to ponder as you mentally prepare for command. While far from all-inclusive, they are intended to spark your imagination as you develop your own programs for success. Once again, these thoughts come from across the Air Force and, as such, have been ops-tested in the field by the commanders I interviewed.

Discipline = Safety

I am always a bit wary of commanders who stress that “safety is first”. We are airmen. Our ultimate job as an Air Force is to very precisely and deliberately destroy enemy targets in support of National Security objectives. This often involves loss of life and/or destruction of property. Nothing about the job is inherently safe. Working around running engines is not safe. Deploying into high threat areas is not necessarily safe. So how do you create a safe working environment in an unsafe business? One answer is by stressing *discipline*. A disciplined squadron will always be a safe squadron; however, the reverse is not necessarily true. Discipline to an aviator means strict adherence to the rules of engagement in war and training rules in peacetime. Discipline to a maintainer means

adherence to technical orders and precise documentation of work performed. A disciplined squadron will take pride in its facilities and work areas. Standards for wear of the uniform and personal appearance will be strict, understood, and supported by your supervision. Punish breaches of discipline immediately and openly. When you build your squadron safety program, focus on discipline first. Achieve it and you will be the safest operation on base with no sacrifice in mission readiness.

Take Responsibility for Fun

By taking responsibility for FUN in your squadron, you will not only improve morale, you will produce memories that will endure long after your command tour ends. People in your organization should *want* to have your job. Not because of all the responsibility it entails or because of the power or prestige. They should want to be a commander someday because it looks like you are having so much darn fun in the job. Believe me, this is far easier said than done. As you have seen in many of the stories shared thus far, there will be plenty of moments when the job will seem overwhelming and at times no fun at all. Keep these thoughts to yourself or your peers. An enthusiastic commander radiates his or her enthusiasm throughout the squadron. It is a time-proven truth that squadrons take on the personality of the commander over time – warts and all. If you are a grump, your squadron will generally not be a happy place to work. People will key on your mood. Walk in and slam the door to your office some day. Within ten minutes, most folks in your squadron will know that something is up and many key supervisors will waste valuable time wondering whether they did something to put you in such a foul mood. By the end of the day, your mood will be reflected across the squadron.

We often don't realize the effect we have on our units as "the boss". As such, be positive and enthusiastic about your squadron, your mission, and your role as commander. On the other hand, I would never advise putting on a show. Unless you've had some serious acting training, your troops will see through you in a second and you will have the reverse affect. It is not necessary to be positive every minute of every day. At times, you might need to show some carefully controlled anger to ensure appropriate emphasis is placed on a problem area. However, in general, you must work to be a positive influence on the squadron.

Lt Col Dave "Face" Nichols is among the most positive commanders I've worked with. While at Aviano, his enthusiasm and love of the 510th Fighter Squadron, the Buzzards, resonated around the wing. Here are a few words from him on leadership:

People make leadership exciting, complex, frustrating, and rewarding. I approach the challenge with a simple acronym – ICE. It stands for intelligence, compassion, energy, and experience. Let me briefly mention each.

Intelligence is your learned and studied abilities, your technical competence, and your leadership skills, i.e. your bag of knowledge. As the commander, you must understand the technical aspects of your business and be among the best at what you do – this will free you to lead. Don't try to gain this "intelligence" in a vacuum. Learn about your mission, understand your people and what they and others expect of the squadron. Let the "smart guys" in the unit help spin you up. Read about and understand other leaders. Never think you have learned it all – continue to study until the day you pass on the unit guidon. Be an intelligent leader.

Next is **compassion** – easy to explain but very difficult to accomplish. Your people need to know that you care about them and they can trust you to look out for their interests. I tried to start on the right foot with each new "Buzzard" by insisting that he or she take the first two weeks off after arrival to get their families settled. I encouraged them to spend time at home -- then I explained why. It was entirely selfish on my part. While they were assigned as "Buzzards", there would be times when

we would have to work long and hard both deployed and at home. We were never more than 24 hours from loading live ordnance on our aircraft and flying them into harms way. I made it clear that when this happened, I needed them focused 100% on the job at hand – not worrying about problems at home. I also encouraged them to share their experiences with their loved ones so they felt part of what we were doing.

Approach your command opportunity with **energy**. Make sure people know and can see that you are excited about your job as commander. Let them feel and be part of your excitement – enough so that the workplace becomes energized and enjoyable. Enthusiasm is contagious – spread it wisely.

The final letter in the acronym is hidden – it stands for **experience**. This is something that comes with time in the seat and it ties the acronym together. Use not only your experience but also others both inside and outside of the squadron. No one has all the answers to the often-complex situations you will be faced with as a commander. Tap into as many sources as possible and avoid “going it alone” on the tough ones. Chances are, someone around you has faced a similar situation and can offer helpful advice.

Remember, you have been chosen to command because of your demonstrated success, Leadership as a commander will be a daily challenge. Use the ICE acronym to help. More than anything though, enjoy every minute – it truly is the best job in the Air Force!¹⁶

Celebrate Heroes – Not Machines

Research and celebrate the proud history of your unit. If you don’t have a squadron historian, hire one within. Have him or her research through the Air University or the Air Force Historian the places and times your unit has been called for duty. Before you take command (or as soon as possible thereafter), study the squadron’s history. You are joining a potentially long line of former commanders who gave their heart and soul to the unit you now command. Get in touch with them. Ask for their assistance in bringing

¹⁶ Nichols, Dave, Col, USAF, interview, Feb 01

the history of the squadron to life. Invite them to the squadron for a commander's call. If you are lucky enough to live in proximity with past squadron members, invite them out and make them feel part of today's squadron. How many units in the Air Force can you walk into today that celebrate their proud history throughout their facilities? Chances are most squadrons you have been in have celebrated machines rather than heroes. Specifically, we tend to put pictures of aircraft all around our squadrons but do little to honor the men and women who wore your squadron patch in previous years. We need to reverse this trend across our Air Force and you can begin with your squadron. The benefit will be quickly seen as members realize they are part of a long line of professionals who have been in your unit. By developing an association with those who've "gone before", you bring this history to life.

Sponsor Program

Of all the "people" programs you will have in your squadron, none is more critical to the long-term health of the squadron than the sponsor program. The positive benefits of an active sponsor program are immeasurable. When a new member of your squadron arrives, have the sponsor gather as many folks as possible, throw on your squadron T-shirts and ball caps, and go meet the family. Often they arrive tired and beat from a long trip. Find a local restaurant that is willing to adopt your squadron and hang your patch on the wall. Make this the location you frequent for incoming family dinners. Obviously, as the commander, you can't make every dinner. However, establish a process during your weekly staff meeting that informs you of incoming personnel and sponsor assignment. Establish a standard procedure that ensures the sponsor is allowed time off to help the

family get settled. Encourage spouse support groups to get involved in the welcome. Dazzle the newcomers with a sense of family – they are joining an elite unit that takes care of each other. Your personal interest in the program will resonate around the squadron. Talk about the program at monthly commander's calls. Follow up during monthly newcomer briefings. If you learn that a squadron member arrived with no sponsorship, find out what happened. Again, the positive payback of this program is immeasurable. Not only is it fun, it becomes perpetual. When it becomes this family's turn to sponsor a new member, they know how the game is played. In the Air Force, we recruit individuals but we retain families. When someone in your squadron comes upon the inevitable decision point of whether to remain in the Air Force or move on to civilian life, you want them to weigh the “fun factor” in their decision. We cannot compete with the commercial sector in the salary or stability game. What we do have to offer is service that makes a difference and unmatched camaraderie anywhere on the globe. You want your troops to know that the treatment they received when they arrived in your squadron will never be repeated at Delta Airlines or Microsoft. This kind of family environment and support network only exists in our Air Force. It is your job to make this a priority and train the next group of commanders to continue the tradition.

Mentoring Program

When Col Lanson Conley commanded the maintenance squadron, he developed a superb mentoring program as follows:

After becoming a squadron commander, I found myself in some sense unprepared for the job. Sure I attended the squadron commander's course and got all the hot tips from previous commanders. But commanding is more than just knowledge. It is knowing how and what to think about, how to correctly apply the knowledge you have (wisdom) and understanding the real role of the commander. These things are only learned over time. I decided, therefore, that one of my jobs as commander was to prepare my younger officers for future command. As such, I set up a function called "Hoofers and Doofers" for mentoring. Once a month I assigned one of my officers to host the function, usually Friday afternoon around 1600. The host officer would provide a room with food and drinks. When we met, in an informal atmosphere, I would present the officers with a real world situation I was dealing with or had just dealt with, and let each discuss it and provide a recommendation. Once the discussion was complete, I would offer my insights and tell them what I did and why. I also used the time to listen to what was on their minds – good and bad. This was a great forum for helping them develop their "sense of the commander". They were eager to attend and enjoyed participating, as did I.¹⁷

Clearly, there are an infinite number of great ideas for improving the quality of service and quality of life for your airmen. For any program to succeed and become self-sufficient, it must have three critical ingredients:

1. A single person in charge
2. An executable and well-thought out game plan
3. A plan for follow-up¹⁸

When a program fails, look back and you will likely find one of these three items missing. Most often, we tend to get the first two right but neglect to follow up appropriately. Develop a systematic approach that allows you to keep focused on a wide array of programs to ensure they stay on track.

Remember, as mentioned in the first chapter, any program you initiate should fit into a broader game plan you developed when you laid out your vision.

¹⁷ Conley, Lanson, Col, USAF, interview, Jan 01

¹⁸ Ryan, Mike, Gen, USAF, interview, Jun 1996

By following these basic rules, you will be well on your way to establishing viable and exciting programs that will survive long past the day you give up the squadron.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

" We must all hang together, or assuredly, we shall all hang separately."

-- Benjamin Franklin

You are about to begin a fantastic journey through the best two years of your Air Force career. Col Tim Timmons describes squadron command as “the only time when you are simultaneously close to the mission and command. Any duty below squadron command may be close to the mission, but the mission is being accomplished somebody else’s way. Duty above squadron level may be involve command and doing things your way, but you are too far removed from the mission and the people. Squadron command is that one point in time when you have the best of both worlds.”¹⁹

The reality of the present and near future is clear. We will be called upon to utilize aerospace power around the world more frequently in support of National Security objectives. Accomplishing these missions (at the level of expertise our nation has come to expect) takes creativity, innovation, courage, and absolute adherence to core values. As a squadron commander, you are essential to success. If reading this paper has helped you mentally prepare for duty and given you *"food for thought"* as you ponder how you want to command your squadron, I will have accomplished my objective.

Best of luck and clear skies in the best job you will ever have.

¹⁹ *Commanding an Air Force Squadron*, Timmons, Timothy, Col, USAF (Maxwell AFB: Air University Press, 1993) p. xix

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Appendix A

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