

# Interview: Lt Gen Michael C. Gould, Superintendent of Cadets

*The following article is a summary of an interview conducted on July 6th 2010 between Lieutenant General Gould, Superintendent of the United States Air Force Academy (USAF), and Angela Mound, Scholarship Associate in USAFA's Center for Character and Leadership Development.*

MS. MOUND: General, how would you describe the changing nature of the Profession of Arms in the 21st Century.

LTGEN GOULD: What's changing the most is technology. The biggest challenge becomes anticipating the impact of these changes. For example, here at the Academy our rigorous academic program helps us to create young people who can think critically, which is what is required for us to stay ahead of technology. Our profession needs critical thinkers out there who can anticipate the next change, people who can adapt on the fly, problem-solvers to plan for the unknown. It's hard to do. But if we don't we won't be able to think ahead to what's coming next. The reality is that in this day and age our planning, programming and budgeting take so long. Our acquisition

process and our weapons development takes so many years that we can't guess wrong. Otherwise, we will be committing billions of dollars towards some capability that's going to be outdated. That's why we need critical thinkers who are equipped to anticipate the implications of rapidly changing technology and are prepared to lead our Airmen in the 21st Century.

MS MOUND: Is this emphasis on "critical thinking" something new for the profession?

LTGEN GOULD: I remember the early days of computerized scheduling for flying operations. Back then, if the computer was down, the jets wouldn't fly. You didn't know when to step to the airplane. We didn't know what to load on it. We get so reliant on technology. We need critical thinkers who are thinking ahead and saying, "Look, just because the

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computer system is down, the operations need to continue.” We may have all these capabilities, but if we are so heavily reliant on technology and then through a malfunction or perhaps cyber attack, we lose that capability, we need to be able to think our way through it.

MS.MOUND: How does this idea of technological change fit with the Academy’s mission to develop leaders of character?

LTGEN GOULD: When I think about the attributes necessary to lead in this environment, they are the same attributes that we’ve based our training and education and officer development on for many years. It’s all about integrity, service and excellence. And not to sound too cliché, but that’s what is special about the Air Force Academy. While we will keep up with the new technology by training cadets in the new fields of Cyber warfare or Unmanned Aerial Systems, what really makes us special is our core values: integrity, service and excellence. And these values don’t change over time. In fact, when we start thinking that these values are shifting, that’s when we will lose our focus. And so our challenge here at the Academy is to hang on to these bedrock values -- but also to think of better ways, more effective ways of teaching these young people why integrity comes first. And while we can lecture all day and talk about it -- it’s the real-world example that works best. It’s building realism into all the training we do. It’s building realism into the classroom. And by realism, I’m talking about real-world problems, things that our cadets can relate to. Whether it’s a training exercise or studying in the classroom, things that they can actually apply to their lives or applications they can envision down the road. We need to continue to think of ways to get better at this.”

MS.MOUND: Is this why our cadets like listening to men and women who have recently returned from Iraq or Afghanistan? Is it because these officers have experienced “real-world” military challenges? I’m thinking specifically of the Academy’s programs Falcon Heritage Forum and the National Character & Leadership Symposium (NCLS).

LTGEN GOULD: Yes. In fact, this year, we decided at my urging to dedicate two full days to the NCLS. We will have no classes on Thursday or Friday. I want everybody at the Academy to be able to focus on our visitors, including our faculty and staff. We’re doing this because of feedback we’ve received from the cadets. You know, it’s like when you were in grade school and going on a field trip. It was always a whole lot more fun than Spelling and Math and History. It’s kind of like a field trip for us when we bring in these distinguished people. We learn from other people’s experiences, from their war stories, and we learn from their stories about overcoming adversity.

MS. MOUND: Are we doing a good job communicating the importance of these core values to our cadets?

LTGEN GOULD: We do well, but we can always improve. I’m concerned about each of the 1,000 cadets who walk across the stage on Graduation Day. I want the last graduate to be just as prepared to lead and lead with character as I do the number-one graduate. I realize that’s sort of dreaming about a perfect world, but that should be our goal. Every one our graduates are going to be a Second Lieutenant; every one of them will be leading airmen from day one. So are we doing well? You bet. Can we do it better? Absolutely. And I think the way we have to attack this challenge is to figure out the best use of a cadet’s time. Each one of us at

the Academy needs to ask: “What is the right mix of academics, military and athletic training?”

MS MOUND: What are your thoughts on helping our cadets become the best leaders they can be?

LTGEN GOULD: One of the ways we can turn them into better leaders is let them be the teachers. And we have to be big enough to acknowledge that they do have some skill sets and some knowledge that we don’t.

Major General Perry Smith, who has written several books on leadership, builds on the theme that “leaders are teachers and teachers are leaders.” We need to be big enough to acknowledge, “Hey, our cadets may have some skill sets we don’t. Teach me.” I try to get feedback from cadets all the time. I ask them: “How can we do this better?” I get a lot of good ideas.

MS MOUND: When it comes to exchanging ideas on how to develop leaders of character do the military academies collaborate enough?

LTGEN GOULD: Well, I think it’s important that we share ideas because we are all about duty. Each service academy has that common goal of enculturating young people into the concept of duty, serving one’s country and doing it selflessly. We have to avoid believing that any one of us is doing it the right way and the rest are not. If that every happened, we’d all be missing an opportunity to learn from each other.