

# Becoming a Leader

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Every cadet arrives at their respective academy with a goal in mind. Some wish to follow in the footsteps of a family member, to become pilots, infantry officers, command a ship, and perhaps others simply because they believe it is good career choice. Regardless of their motives at some point during their career, every cadet realizes what they are truly here for: to lead other men and women. For me, that time came in a moment of sorrow with the death of 1st Lieutenant Roslyn Schulte.

Not only was Lieutenant Schulte the first female Air Force Academy graduate to die in combat, she was one of my cadre during BCT. Anyone who has been through basic training of any type will tell you that much of what you do often seems pointless at times. As Basic Cadet's rule of thumb, if you are told to do something you probably won't do it right. If by chance you happen to do it correctly, you probably didn't do it fast enough. If the stars align and you happen to do the right thing fast enough, your uniform looks like it was tumble-dried by a pack of ravenous wolves and you should be ashamed. In light of the endless corrections a Basic Cadet receives, it

becomes easy for them to lose sight of the reason they came to the Academy in the first place.

My basic training flight, Barbarians D Flight, was "corrected" more than once in the six weeks of basic training. The one correction that has stuck with me through my years here was made by the then Cadet Roslyn Schulte. As I recall, we were on the Terrazzo practicing our marching when she approached our flight. For those who are unfamiliar with marching, the term "practice makes perfect" is especially relevant. Simply knowing how to march will only get you so far. For a flight to march with precision, as was expected by our cadre, the flight's members must be intimately familiar with every detail of the person on their right, left, and front. When a person marching on the right is just one inch out of dress, the entire line can curve; deforming the entire formation. It was on this matter that we were corrected that day.

While her peers seemed to yell for the sake of yelling, Roslyn made it a point to speak calmly. She pointed out how the little things can make a huge difference and asked if any of us had seen

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the Thunderbirds perform. Of course we had, but many of us were still at a loss as to how the best pilots in the world had anything to do with marching. She then posed the question, “What do you think would happen if the Thunderbird pilots accepted being one measly inch off in formation?” That question hit us like a sack of bricks. The Thunderbird’s rely on flawless timing and precision to perform some of the greatest aerial acrobatics possible. Often times they fly within inches of each other. An inch is quite a bit of real-estate in a Thunderbird performance. Her message was clear, while it may not seem like it, the little things can make the difference between success and failure. She left us with this, “It seems like yesterday that I was exactly where you are. I only have a year left at the Academy. Each of you came here to serve your country, so remember that. This is going to be your Air Force Academy so make sure you take care of the little things!”

How often is it that we take a moment to consider what it is that we are here for? Before coming to the Academy I acknowledged dying in service to one’s country is a real possibility; a fact which we all have considered at some point during our military careers. That truth had never truly struck home, however, until I learned of Roslyn’s death. Unlike those faces I had seen on the news, suddenly the ultimate sacrifice had a voice, a smell, a personality, and a memory to remind me just what I was preparing myself for. Her death was a painful reminder that whether you’re commanding a cadet squadron, teaching a class, or just trying to make it through Basic Training each and every one of us is here to serve.

Perhaps the most important aspect of being a leader is the character with which you lead. We gain respect from our followers not by our rank

but by acting in a manner which earns it. As I mentioned earlier, there were numerous cadre during Basic, but the ones who made the biggest impact were those who didn’t simply yell to hear their own voice. They conducted themselves professionally and always kept the end-goal in mind. They corrected us, but in the same breath they reminded us why those corrections were important. A question that I often asked myself during that time was, “What was it that made this way of being available to some cadre and not to others?” It took me some years to finally answer that question. The difference lay simply in the fact that there were those who were “complete” with themselves as leaders and those who were not. That is, there were those who recognized what it was they were there to do, and acted in accordance with that goal. Those who had no clear personal future to strive for were left only to yell.

Every cadet has heard the motto, “Integrity first, Service before self, Excellence in all we do.” This is generally accepted as the manner in which all members of the armed forces should conduct themselves. Last semester, when working in the Center for Character Development, I shared a cubicle with the Academy’s own Chief Vasquez. One day we were discussing leadership when the Chief told me something that took me completely by surprise; that the motto was wrong. He explained that “Service before self” was a fallacious mannerism. Before I stir up the hornet’s nest, allow me to explain. The Chief explained that we must be complete with ourselves before we can lead others. A leader who is poor in character cannot hope to lead others effectively much less accomplish the mission. We must clearly define our goals, our beliefs, and

what it is we are committed to before we attempt to serve others.

In order to get complete with ourselves and define these goals, we may be required to change and that change is often times painful. As Basic Cadets we all learn in our Contrails of General Billy Mitchell, the visionary of modern airpower. Of course to most of us, he was just another bullet in the list of names, squadrons, airplanes, and other seemingly irrelevant facts which we had to memorize and regurgitate on a whim at the beckoning of our cadre. With fear, uncertainty, and the desire to please their trainers clouding every Basic's thoughts it becomes difficult to truly appreciate what it was the General accomplished.

Much to the chagrin of his fellow officers, General Mitchell recognized that the advent of new technology must usher an adaptation of Army strategy and tactics. Having served in the First World War he became an advocate for the expansion of the Army Air Service which later became the Army Air Corp. He advocated using air power to attack an enemy's "vital centers." For that, he was forced to resign as a colonel. However, by the end of World War Two he was viewed as a martyr for Air Power. General Mitchell is a testament that one man can make a difference should their commitment be strong enough. He was but one officer in an entire Army, yet he created a future which would have otherwise not come to pass which shaped millions of lives simply by being complete with who he was and what he believed and living into that future which he believed in.

I've been fortunate enough in my time here at the Air Force Academy to bear witness to many positive changes. When I in-processed in the

summer of 2005, there was no Recognition (traditional capstone event to become an upperclassman), Combat Survival Training (CST) was a thing of the past, no one knew what an Air Liaison Officer was, much less that they existed, and the only interaction that cadets had with unmanned aerial vehicles was a "Dos Gringos" song. At the time, the religious atmosphere controversy was at its peak and the honor and sexual harassment ordeals were fresh in everyone's mind. Little did I realize it at the time, the Academy was following in its founder's footsteps in true form.

Recognition was the crowning achievement of a freshman's first year at the Air Force Academy; three days of the most intense physical and mental stress which brought to close the first chapter in a cadet's career. For reasons unbeknownst to myself, it was removed. However, in 2006, I was honored to go through Recognition with the last class to be formally recognized thus carrying on the tradition for future members of the long blue line. CST returned in a revised form, replacing what cadet folklore dictated as a haze into training like the "real" Air Force. There is now an Unmanned Aerial Systems program which allows cadets to pilot unmanned craft. We began honor lessons, sexual assault briefings, and religious tolerance lectures during Basic that has continued through my senior year.

To say that the cadet wing received all of these changes without angst would not be entirely truthful. General Mitchell could certainly attest to the fact that there are always growing pains with any deviation from the norm. Much as the opponents of air power in the early 20th century fought to resist the change, many cadets and I am certain faculty are not pleased with some of

these ‘adaptations’ that the service academies are undergoing. Often times, those cadets who came to be pilots oppose the expansion of the UAV programs. Many cadets can attest to complaining about a sexual assault briefing after lunch on a day when they have other “more important” things to do. Others still might believe the CST program they must complete serves no purpose as the desk job they want would never use such a thing. I cannot claim innocence of having such thoughts in the past and I am not here to argue their usefulness or effectiveness. However, I have realized only that the way we act in accordance to such changes determine their effectiveness and to a greater extent, their purpose.

To illustrate that point, take for example a professional football team. We will agree that the goal of any team is to be successful, or in this case to win. There are two ways such a team can act, regardless of their level of skill and actual performance. They either act as if they are winners or they do not. A winning football team does not take the field with the mindset that they are going to lose. Instead, they approach each game with the ambition to win and a plan to reach that end. If we can agree on that point, perhaps we can agree on another. The same professional football team gains this way of thinking through one of two ways either through past success or through commitment to a common goal. Consider for a moment the New Orleans Saints. Before the 2009 season, they had never won a Super Bowl. Certainly their past successes in the Super Bowl, or lack there-of, did not give them the winning mindset. It was a commitment to a common goal that brought them their success. This is true for not only teams, but for each of us as individuals as well.

At first glance these changes at the Academy may seem a bit mundane. Cadets training to be officers is to be expected; that is the reason the academies exist after all. Deeper examination reveals something much more telling about these changes. Each one is a proactive attempt to prepare the young men and women who attend the Academy to lead. Instead of simply waiting for the world and the Air Force to change, the Academy has a clear definition of the future it envisions and is acting in a manner concurrent with that future. It was for this reason that I was elated when news reached the cadet wing that the Academy was undergoing yet another change. The Center for Character and Leadership Development would be expanding.

As imperative as it is that organizations change to fulfill their goals, it is perhaps more important for leaders to remain ethically sound. Just as the times change, so do the moral standards by which we live. Those “gray areas” you hear so much about become more and more inclusive. In our education system, cheating has become a regular activity. In the business world, we hear tales of companies like Enron and other corporate entities who decided that lining their pockets was more important than the truth. In times such as these, a person’s character becomes increasingly critical.

Lieutenant General Harry Wyatt, the director of the Air National Guard once said, “Let us endeavor to make carbon copies of the character and values that facilitate excellence.” For those who are called upon to lead others, there remains a moral obligation to one’s followers to uphold those ethical standards which society might have abandoned. A leader’s actions are constantly under scrutiny as they reflect not only

on themselves but the organization which they represent and faltering but once can cast them in a dark shadow for the rest of his or her life. For that reason, while others may enjoy the privilege of choice on the matter, a leader must remain stalwart in the face of temptation and adamantly do what is right, even when no one is looking.

Although the times of General Mitchell are almost a century behind us, the military and its

academies continue to follow in his footsteps. Each and every one of us is here to serve our nation. As leaders, it is vital to our credibility as well as our ability to lead, that we are complete with ourselves. While society may abandon its morals, we as leaders must remain steadfast in our beliefs and always remember to take care of the little things.