

MILITARY

WHAT IS YOUR PURPOSE?

Richard Clark, Superintendent, Lt Gen, USAF

Interviewed By: Kim Campbell, Col, USAF

Campbell: You mentioned at your Change of Command Ceremony that the Academy set you up for success in your career. I also feel the same way about my career, as it really started my path and shaped my future. Would you share what you took away from your time as a cadet and how that still influences you today?

Clark: When I look back, there are a couple of concepts that stand out, but not in any particular order. The first is the ability to multi-task. As a cadet you have to do a lot of things at the same time, every day. You have to manage yourself, your time, and your skills, and put them in the right place at the right time. As an officer, especially as you increase in rank, you find the ability to multitask becomes incredibly useful. Developing that discipline is a great habit I've benefited from for decades.

The relationships I've built have also been critical. Many people who I worked with throughout my career I know from the Academy. Even if I didn't know them when I was here or they weren't from my class, there is always a common bond among graduates. It can be an ice breaker and a relationship builder, either socially or professionally, because you know somebody who knows somebody.

Perseverance is another lesson I took away from my time at the Academy. There are a lot of ups and downs as a cadet. I remember some days feeling incredible because I received a good GR score or I made no mistakes at football practice, but the next day I was sitting confinements because I signed in late. Each week there were ups and downs, but I learned how to deal with those moments and not let the little things bother me. By changing my perspective, and persevering, I kept pressing toward the goals of graduation and being an officer in the Air Force.

The biggest character development for me, though, was trying to be an honorable person and understanding what that meant. Honor now means more to me after I left here as a Second Lieutenant, but my foundation of living honorably started here at the Academy. I actually look back and see just how impactful my time as a cadet has remained in my life. I impart my learned knowledge on my kids and they are beneficiaries of a lot of the lessons I learned here. Such as how you show respect to people, how you talked to people, and how you carry yourself in all situations. All of these skills I developed played a large role in what made my experience

Lt. Gen Richard M. Clark is the Superintendent, U.S. Air Force Academy, Colorado Springs, Colorado. He directs a four-year regimen of military training, academics, athletic, and character development programs leading to a Bachelor of Science Degree and a commission as a Second Lieutenant in the United States Air Force or United States Space Force. Lt. Gen. Clark graduated from the U.S. Air Force Academy in 1986. He has a distinguished career commanding at multiple levels, serving as a White House Fellow, Commandant of Cadets at the Air Force Academy, and Senior Defense Official/Defense Attaché. He is a command pilot with over 4200 hours, 400 of those in combat, <https://www.af.mil/About-Us/Biographies/Display/Article/108502/lieutenant-general-richard-m-clark/>

great. Even though I didn't know it all of the time when I was there, I know it now.

Campbell: I think many graduates would agree with you that we didn't always know it at the time, or know how it would shape us, but we can look back years later and recognize the great lessons we learned from the Academy. I would like to touch on something that you mentioned about living honorably. While you were here as the Commandant, the Leader of Character Framework was established. Can you talk about why it was important to establish the framework of Lifting Others, Living Honorably, and Elevating Performance?

Clark: The framework was a roadmap that allowed us to get to the desired goal of living honorably, lifting others, and elevating performance. We must realize that we have to meet people where they are because everyone comes to the Academy from different places, different backgrounds, different parts of the country, and have different experiences. When we are developing

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going to trust us, those are characteristics that we should always demonstrate, not only as military officers, but as people of character in general.

Campbell: With that in mind, where do you feel diversity and inclusion fit into the Leader of Character Framework?

Clark: When we talk about the three dimensions and meeting people where they are, we must also accept them for who they are. We all have to be able to build relationships and make connections so that we can move forward together. Whether you are leading or following, it's about the connections that we are able to make with people from any background, regardless of their ethnicity, race, gender, economic status, or social class.

Dignity and respect is absolutely essential for everyone. If you don't have that, you don't earn trust, you don't have a connection, and there isn't leadership or followership. Respect extends beyond our borders to our global environment. I've had two assignments overseas, deployed three times, and I've interacted with people from different countries, languages, backgrounds, and cultures. If we are going to develop as leaders in every way, morally and intellectually, we must develop from a diversity standpoint. Inclusion is also a moral imperative, a leadership imperative, a strategic imperative, and an American imperative because daring to be inclusive allows for empathy, perspective, and understanding, which only makes our leaders better. Honestly, this approach just

Colonel Kim N. Campbell is the Director of the Center for Character and Leadership Development, United States Air Force Academy, Colorado. The Center is responsible for aligning and supporting professional development for faculty and staff and reinforces character and leadership programs within the 4,000-member Cadet Wing. Colonel Campbell was commissioned in 1997 as a distinguished graduate of the United States Air Force Academy with a Bachelor of Science degree in space operations. She is a Marshall Scholar with two master's degrees, one in business administration from the University of London, and one in international security studies from the University of Reading, England. She has served as a Squadron Commander, Operations Group Commander, Air Force Senior Fellow at the Atlantic Council, Military Assistant to the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy in the Office of the Secretary of Defense, and an instructor in the Department of Military and Strategic Studies at the United States Air Force Academy. She is a command pilot with over 1,700 hours in the A-10, including 375 combat hours. She has flown combat missions in Operations SOUTHERN WATCH, ENDURING FREEDOM, and IRAQI FREEDOM.

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Campbell: When we talk about developing leaders of character at the Academy, what role does character have in that leadership development?

Clark: Being someone of strong character allows people to look to you as an example and someone they want to follow. Most of us would agree that we want to follow a person of high character. When a follower sees that in someone, it's natural for them to feel a trust in and connection with that individual. We have to set that example and show people that if you follow me, we are going to follow the right path. It's not just our subordinates who are following us, but our peers, teammates, and wingmen connect with us based on our character as well. Mutual trust relies on character, which is the fabric that holds every team together, and leads us all toward success.

Campbell: Recognizing the important connection between leadership and character, would you share an experience of how character influenced your leadership?

Clark: In my career there have been many leaders who have exemplified character and helped me move forward. My Superintendent when I was a cadet was General Winfield "Skip" Scott. He knew me because I played football, and he was a big football fan. He knew that the Air Force had determined I wasn't qualified for pilot training because I had dislocated my shoulders, both of them, multiple times. But he, being a combat pilot himself, had ejected from his fighter. When he heard that they were disqualifying me because of my shoulders, he took it upon himself to say, I understand what the Air Force is saying, but I disagree. He had the fortitude to step in and intervene and tell the Air

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Campbell: I love that story and I have to tell you that I had a very similar experience because I was not pilot qualified either. But, someone was willing to take a chance on me as well, and that choice stuck with me. One act of kindness showed me that leadership is about looking out for your Airmen and being willing to take a chance and make a difference.

Clark: We have that in common. It is great to hear that there are more experiences where we can point to a moment in time that changed everything. It took someone with character to do it. Someone who not only said, “I am doing this,” but also made it happen.

Campbell: I think it is a reminder to us as leaders that no matter what level you are at, if you can impact an Airman’s life, you never know where that road is going to take that Airman. Who knows, they could be the next Superintendent of the Air Force Academy? With our previous discussion in mind, something that you previously talked about really resonated with me, which is knowing your purpose and your why. Would you share what your why is and why you continue to serve?

Clark: My why is to inspire people to be their absolute best. If I could have some impact on the people that I meet, to inspire them a little bit, then I would consider my life good. I mentioned earlier that people have done that for me many times. Sometimes it was even something as simple as a congratulatory note, which just encouraged me to keep going. So, if I had one thing that I could do every day of my life, it would be to inspire others to become everything that they possibly can. There is no other better force multiplier in a person’s life. Can you imagine if we all did that? Can you imagine if the whole world sought to inspire someone else to be better every day? I realize that everyone has different skills that they bring to the table. But, we all need a purpose, and we should all seek to have a purpose that is bigger than ourselves. It’s not about me. It’s something bigger than me. When your reason for living is something bigger than yourself, your effort and your inspiration become bigger. I had to find mine. For a chunk of my life, I was just trying to make it and really living for myself every day. If I could make it through the day and not get kicked out of the Academy, or make it through the day without washing out of pilot training, then I called it a good day. As I got older, I started realizing that there is more. I’m not here just for me,

or here in this world just to survive. I’m here to make it better, and I have to find my purpose and figure out what my mark is going to be. We are all here for something. I know that we are here for a reason, and we each have to find that. Once we do, we are off to the races.

Campbell: I appreciate your reflections on your time as a cadet and trying to survive. I know a lot of cadets feel that way at times. So, with that in mind, if General Clark could go back and give Cadet Clark some advice, what would you say?

Clark: My advice would be to seek out your purpose now, and to find the bigger why. The Academy started my foundation of knowing that it is about something bigger than myself. But, back when I was a cadet, I didn’t realize that I was formulating what it meant to be part of something that was bigger than myself. If I had known it then, I would have sought it more intently, and I might have pursued having a bigger impact on

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others during my time at the Academy. I would also tell myself to expand my horizons. Don’t limit yourself. Granted – football, my squadron, and academics took a lot of time, but I feel that if I had broadened myself a little more, I would have been inspired to do more. My passions would have driven me to an even more rewarding experience. I would tell Cadet Clark don’t just survive, you want to thrive. You need to get out there and be all that you can be, find your passions and go for it. Do what you love, and love what you do!

Campbell: I love to talk to cadets now about the importance of not just surviving, but thriving. To try and do all they can and learn all they can because it will carry over into their Air Force careers. Along those lines, you were a cadet, you were the Commandant, and now you are the Superintendent. I’d like to know

what you are most excited about with this new position of command at USAFA.

Clark: That question wraps up everything that we have talked about. The position of Superintendent gives me the opportunity to live that purpose, and give something back to the school that helped me realize my purpose. It's about the cadets, staff, and faculty, and doing whatever I can to help everybody here to be all that they can be, each and every day. When I wake up in the morning, I look forward to coming to work -- to see what I can do to help us get to the next level. You can't have a better position than the kind of job where you feel like your purpose is being fulfilled, and I actually get to do it every day. Coming back here, I couldn't ask for more. When I was promoted to 2-star, two of my bosses asked me what job I wanted. I said, "I have never in my career in the Air Force asked for a job. But, if you are asking me if there is one job that I could have, it would be the USAFA Superintendent." Both of them, at two different times went back and explored it, and came back and said that it wasn't the right time and I am going to go do other things. So, I thought that the ship had sailed. When the Chief of Staff asked me last April if I would consider this position, you can't imagine the thoughts that went through my head. Being back at the Academy is the best job, the best opportunity, and the best finish to my career that I could ask for. For all the reasons that we just talked about: the things that I want to be, the things that I want to do for people, and the mark that maybe I can leave behind. This is a job where I get to ask someone to rotate both of their arms over their head; and then do whatever I can do for them. If I can do that for as many people as I can, my life will be good and I will feel like I have achieved that purpose.

Campbell: I'm sure that Cadet Clark would never have thought he would come back as Lieutenant General Clark, Superintendent of the United States Air Force Academy. I think it's so important to reinforce to cadets all of the opportunities they have

and all of the great options that are out there for them if they work hard and commit themselves to something bigger than themselves. Are there any final thoughts you'd like to share?

Clark: What I want to impart to cadets is that they are here for a purpose. They have sacrificed a lot. They had other opportunities they could have done, other schools they could have attended, but they chose to come here. What they need to realize is that this is more than just their school and more than just an educational opportunity. If they take this as an opportunity to change the trajectory of their life, it will. The Academy gives you opportunities to build yourself that other places don't provide. If they take that opportunity and own it, they will move in any direction that they want to. I promise. I am living proof of it, and I am here to help them. I know that every other staff and faculty member is here for the same reason. I can see it in the eyes of people during staff meetings or when I am meeting AOCs, coaches, staff, and faculty. They want to give the cadets that experience so that when they leave here, their life is on a trajectory that it otherwise would not have taken. Not just in the military, but in their lives period. Their personal, family, social, professional, and lives as citizens of the world will take a different approach if they own what they develop here and take advantage of the opportunities this Academy provides. It will change everything for them. Take it, own it, and be all that you can be. Don't get bogged down in the little things. Work as hard as you can, do all that you can, and keep moving toward the bigger picture of who you are going to be when you leave here...and live that purpose.

Campbell: You mentioned at your Change of Command Ceremony that the Academy set you up for success in your career. I also feel the same way about my career, as it really started my path and shaped my future. Would you share what you took away from your time as a cadet and how that still influences you today?

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