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Walk the Line

David L. Goldfein, Gen, USAF
USAFA, Class of 1983

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JCLD@usafa.edu

Phone: 719-333-4904

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Walk the Line

David L. Goldfein, Colonel¹, USAF
USAFA, Class of 1983

Walking the Walk²

Leaders have the ability to inspire others to achieve what managers say is not feasible.

—Gen Colin Powell, USA, Retired
—Secretary of State

A great deal has been written about leadership and management and the difference between the two. I am going to use an oversimplified definition that should be useful for our discussion of command: Leadership is about people; management is about things. Successful commanders understand they are equally responsible for both. As a commander, you will be entrusted with both people and things (aircraft, vehicles, parts). You must balance your time between these areas of responsibility. Commanders who 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 who 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 is this: A successful commander balances his time between leadership and management responsibilities.

As a manager, 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 understand what is required (both integral to the squadron and outside) for your squadron to accomplish its mission. A blind and/or ignorant eye is not the same as empowerment.

As a leader, you must inspire your people to accomplish more than management rules would suggest is possible. You, along with every other commander in the USAF, will have fewer than the optimum number of personnel and resources needed to accomplish your mission—that is a fact of life. Understand clearly that these limitations do not constitute an excuse for failure to answer the call. Your inspirational leadership is required to overcome these and other obstacles in achieving mission success. Doing more with less is a fact of existence in the Air Force. Your challenge as a commander is to do the very best you can with what you have. Here are several stories from commanders who faced daunting challenges during their tours. Read them with a critical eye and think now about how you might handle similar circumstances in the future. The first involves

1 General David Goldfein is currently the Air Force Chief of Staff. When he wrote this article, he was at the rank of Colonel.

2 This article was originally printed as part of the book: Goldfein, D. (2001). *Sharing Success – Owing Failure: Preparing to Command in the Twenty-First Century Air Force*. Maxwell AFB, AL: Air University Press.

a situation where the fundamental ethics of a commander were tested. This tale comes from Col Terry New.

The Time and Place: December 1993, Aviano AB, Italy.

When I was 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 United Nations (UN) forces on the ground trying to mediate the conflict.

I led the deployment sortie to Aviano, where the 31st Wing Commander and staff gave us 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 the squadron's 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 (advanced echelon) team down a few days prior and this was my first opportunity to talk with him since arrival. 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 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 that we "do whatever it takes" to fly our tasking the next day.

We found my maintenance supervisor on the flight line 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 supervisors, 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 to my first commander's call and what I had said were my priorities as well as 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.

I felt I could justify a decision either way, based on my first two priorities. Number three, just do the right thing if you can't make the decision based on the first two priorities. 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 (operations group) 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. After tempers had calmed and we were flying combat missions, the general made his position 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!³

This story also highlights an important part of making command decisions: 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 it's 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 it. Chances are, the longer you are in command, the more you will find these gut checks to be superb decision guides.

Lt Col Charlie Lyon, commander of the 22d Fighter Squadron at Spangdahlem, learned a lesson about paying attention to the details.

The Time and Place: March 1999, 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 (Naval Air Station) Sigonella that our destination was not Aviano but Spangdahlem, adding a new twist to our upcoming tasking: we would be 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

3 Col Terry New, USAF, interviewed by author, February 2001.

deployed to Operation NORTHERN WATCH and others who had remained at home station.

When we received the execute order, a certain young officer was included in the lineup. After his second mission, he was extremely shaken up—he had been 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 of 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.⁴

A critical aspect of successful command will be taking care of your troops. A story from Lt Col Mike Boera, commander of the 23d Fighter Squadron at Spangdahlem and former operations officer of the 22nd, highlights the importance of putting this high on your priority list.

The Time and Place: December 1996, 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-16s. 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 [sic] 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 and told me I had messed up big-time 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.⁵

Unit failure is undoubtedly one of the most difficult situations for a commander to face. What do you do if the entire organization fails? Col Lanser Conley tells us about just such a situation he faced as a maintenance squadron commander.

⁴ Col Charlie Lyon, USAF, interviewed by author, January 2001.

⁵ Col (sel) Mike Boera, USAF, interviewed by author, January 2001.

The Time and Place: May 1996, 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) 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 re-checks. Thankfully, we passed the NSI. A month and a half later, HQ USAFE (Headquarters USAF Europe) 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 shock wave went all the way up the chain to HQ USAFE. It took months of endless hours to fix the problems and pass a re-inspection.

We had some serious mismanagement problems 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 that 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 whom 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.⁶

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

The time and place: Early 1980s, Eglin AFB, Florida.

There we were, 45 of the USAF's very finest NCOs, handpicked [sic] from throughout TAC (Tactical Air Command), two of the world's most

⁶ Col Lansen Conley, USAF, interviewed by author, December 2000.

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 is 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’s or politician’s tour. Young Captain 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, says, “hhruumphh . . . 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.

[At] 0200 that night, out of a sound sleep, 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. 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 your particular characteristics, represents 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 a 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.⁷

Clearly, this story highlights the notion that leaders with humility don’t think less of themselves—they just think of themselves less.⁸

♦ ♦ ♦

⁷ Col Daniel Zoerb, USAF, interviewed by author, November 2000.

⁸ Kenneth H. Blanchard, *The Heart of a Leader* (Tulsa, OK: Honor Books, 1999), 46.



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