

CGO Corner

“CAPTAIN! MY CAPTAIN!”



Capt Ernest Cage

It has been said that the years one spends as a Captain are some of the best in a military career. In the logistics community we find ourselves leading the daily charge —making the mission happen by launching jets, passing gas, pushing cargo, leading truck convoys, and a host of other tasks. Finally you are judged by your actions and expertise rather than by the single gold or silver bar you wear on your shoulders. The enduring phrase of “L-T” respectfully muttered by every weary chief or senior has been replaced with “sir” You have paid your dues in time, and it feels good to be accepted by the SNCOs, NCOs and young airmen you lead.

As we get swept away in mountains of e-mails, production meetings, award ceremonies, and daily Airmen leadership it is easy to forget the Lieutenant years. While we all set our eyes on the road ahead and prepare to take on more responsibility, we must also look behind us at the road already traveled. Specifically, I am talking about mentorship – preparing young Lieutenants to be tomorrow’s Captains. Too often our newest officers find themselves thrust into a unit in one of two situations. In bigger squadrons Lieutenants, may be placed in charge of a flight, tasked with all the responsibilities associated with command. While in smaller units, the experience at times can be better characterized as officer-in-charge of all the special projects under the sun.

It is easy to assert that OJT or “learning by doing” is healthy in the course of skills development. You say to yourself, “Hey after all if I made it, then certainly the new Lieutenant can figure it out.” I would argue that this assumption is a faulty approach that merits a course correction. While commissioning sources do an outstanding job teaching principles of leadership, real-world Air Force operations present their own leadership challenges. How does a newly commissioned Lieutenant learn the ropes of leading a flight without driving the superintendent crazy? Who encourages the squadron’s special projects Lieutenant, who thought he or she would be directly leading Airmen from day one, to stay motivated? The answer is, of course, the unit’s senior company grade officers—the Captains.

During my indoctrination into the New Cadet System, I could do nothing right in the eyes of my upper-classmen, many who were only two to three years older than me. When I finally made it to my senior year and commanded a cadet battalion, I took a different approach. I never yelled, instead I let patience and professional discourse set the tone.

I tell this story because it is important for Captains to develop professional informal relationships with Lieutenants. “Yes sir” and “No sir” are appropriate and should be used by the subordinate—however, you must be approachable. Once earned, rank is worn on a uniform for a purpose—you don’t have to prove you are worthy to wear it. Think for a minute about all the things you wish you had known when you were a Lieutenant, what would you have done differently? Take this knowledge and

share it with those who have yet to write their Air Force story. In doing so, you will be directly contributing to a stronger more proficient logistics officer corps—poised and ready to take on the challenges that lie ahead.

Lastly, mentorship is a two way street. Ask yourself, “Are you presenting an image that others will want to follow?” This includes physical demeanor (fitness, uniform, and haircuts), technical competence (Do you know your job?), professional development (PME, Masters Degree, LOA, National Defense Transportation Association (NDTA), Airlift/Tanker Association (A/TA)), and moral leadership (Do you follow your own advice?). You can be assured that your young officers are looking at you, your actions, and your reactions.

I will leave you with this short story. The other day as I was hurrying out of the office for a lunch date, one of our young Lieutenants knocked on my door and asked if I could help him figure out how to do a staff summary sheet. My first reaction was to tell the young officer that I was busy. However, I stopped myself and fifteen minutes later the Lieutenant left my office knowing everything he ever wanted to know about a staff summary sheet plus a few more “I was there stories.” Later that afternoon, the Lieutenant stopped by the office to thank me for my help. He was beaming with pride as he showed me his staff summary sheet which had been signed off by all applicable parties. After he left I thought back to the first time I had to do such a tasking—I was horrified and totally lost. In my mind, helping this young officer was the most important thing I did that day. I leave you with this question and challenge—*What kind of Captain will you be?*

The CGO Corner is written by Captain “Nest” Cage, a Logistics Readiness Officer, currently in the USAF Logistics Career Broadening Program serving as Deputy Director, 547th Propulsion Maintenance Squadron, Oklahoma City Air Logistics Center, Tinker AFB, OK.

For comments, submissions or questions about the CGO Corner please email CGOCORNER@LOANational.org 

****Help Wanted ****

A Special thanks to my co-author Maj (s) Vanessa Vargas for her contributions to the “CGO Corner.” She has “graduated” and is fully employed as the new assistant executive officer to the Air Force Director of Logistics Readiness. That being said, we are looking for a passionate maintenance CGO to join the staff. If you're a good writer and want to help shape the logistics CGO community, then we want you! Interested applicants should submit a sample of your writing and your squadron's commander endorsement letter to Col Dennis Daley at editor@loanational.org.