



The lesson from Cadet Officer School

Leaders never stop learning

By Kristi Carr

An intensely academic program, Cadet Officer School required attendance at lectures and seminars, advance reading and journal writing. Listening intently to a lecture are Massachusetts Wing Cadet Capt. Anthony Scicchitano, front; North Carolina Wing Cadet Capt. Daniel Kong, second row left; and Colorado Wing Cadet Maj. Dillon Garvin, second row right, amid a sea of cadets who came from around the country to attend Cadet Officer School in Alabama.

Cadet Officer School just might turn upside down and inside out some preconceptions cadets attending the school have about leadership.

“In certain circumstances and at certain times, everybody is a leader,” declared Lt. Col. Michael R. Foster, activity director for this summer cadet program.

“You never get away from being a leader, whether you’re the official leader or not,” he explained, noting that a parent might be a leader for the family or that, in a crisis situation, an unlikely leader might step forward.

So, when 119 CAP cadets, ages 16-20, descended on Maxwell Air Force Base, Ala., in July — each with visions of calling the shots — what was the approach to this all-chiefs, no-Indians scenario?

For the staff, the answer was the COS curriculum.

The teachers

During the 10 days the cadets spent at Maxwell, they were treated to some of the best relevant Air Force and CAP expertise via a series of lectures on leadership, critical and strategic thinking, creativity, psychology, communication and knowledge about the evolution of air and space power.

This year COS was a guest at Maxwell’s Air University. “Considered the intellectual and leadership center of the Air Force, Maxwell is the perfect venue,” said Foster. “We could take advantage of the same instructors who present similar material to the men and women of the Air Force.” In fact, professional military education is the model for the COS program.

The classes

It was assumed the cadets already had experience in leading small teams, but COS classes took them to a higher strategic level of leadership in which they learned how to lead multiple teams, manage complex tasks and set mid- to long-range goals.

Critical thinking was one of the cadets’

first classes. “We wanted to make sure the cadets knew the difference between criticizing and thinking critically,” said Foster. “Critical thinking means making objective judgments, based on careful reasoning. It’s a skill that’s key for any leader.”

In one lesson about responsibility, cadets were encouraged to get an early start on reading about the 1994 Fairchild Air Force Base, Wash., incident, where a B-52 crashed, killing all aboard. The incident was later dissected in seminar discussion. Others had exhaustively studied this event, concluding it could have been prevented if different decisions, some from as much as three years earlier, had been made. Before those findings were revealed, however, cadets had to come up with



Photos by Susan Robertson, CAP National Headquarters

At the Project X course, cadets put their leadership and teamwork skills to the test to overcome physical challenges. Here they were given three boards of various lengths to use to get the entire team across a water hazard peppered with widely spaced “stepping stones.” From bottom, Cadet 2nd Lts. John Poitras of the New Mexico Wing, Andrew Domsic of the Michigan Wing and Daniel Patenaude of the Connecticut Wing work to navigate the hazard.

their own conclusions.

Cadets were further challenged in their understanding of leadership on Maxwell's Project X course. To overcome physical obstacles, it became apparent a team approach would be needed for success. Foster said, "A team brings different strengths and weaknesses. Sometimes you have to understand you're going to have to be a follower."

An academic course with practical applications, COS probed subjects such as motivation, stress, character and accountability. Cadets were given advance reading assignments, and following lectures by guest speakers, they met in seminars with their instructors to review and discuss what they'd heard. Then they were presented with problems that called for pragmatic applications of their knowledge. Each day the cadets were required to pull together their thoughts from the lectures, seminars and problem-solving exercises into written journals — a nod to the diaries of military greats such as Patton, Eisenhower and Marshall.

"Our aim," said Foster, "was to tie one block of instruction to all other areas of instruction."

The students

From their first day at COS, cadets were subjects in a "leadership laboratory," Foster explained, as the staff continually assessed each of them. "Did they build on the group's individual strengths or weaknesses?" asked Foster. "Or were they just there for themselves?"

Each cadet was expected to use time at COS to develop a personal leadership philosophy, expressed in a speech at the close of the school. Meanwhile, instructors met with them to discuss differences they'd noted between the start and end of the course.

"COS is meant to bridge the gap," said Foster, "between where you are now as a cadet and where you want to be in the future, whether that's in the



"Cadet Officer School has helped me hone my own leadership skills so I can determine areas where I am strong and areas where I am weak. It's given me a new perspective on how many different ways you can lead and a huge edge in confidence." — Cadet Capt. Mychal Weekes, New York Wing, an incoming college freshman on a full Air Force ROTC scholarship, majoring in physics and aviation sciences



"I'm glad I came to Cadet Officer School. I've learned that rank doesn't determine leadership. It's really about your personal responsibility and your capabilities." — Cadet 1st Lt. Lexi Churchill, Tennessee Wing, soon to enlist in the U.S. Navy as a combat medic



"Cadet Officer School, with all its reading and writing assignments, has taught me the importance of time management. I need to complete my own goals before I can help others complete theirs." — Cadet 2nd Lt. DeEstan Turner, Washington Wing, a high school senior considering West Point and the Air Force Academy

Air Force or other military organization, a company or a profession."

One of the lecturers, Capt. Mickey Jordan, who has served the Air Force in 12 different countries and deployed to support four major combat operations, said, "COS is our opportunity to see the absolute best in leadership from the next generation. More than 95 percent of our students indicated they want to serve in the military or government, and there's no doubt the cadets we met at COS will soon be on the distinguished graduates lists of all our service academies and ROTC programs."

Regardless of where a cadet is headed, Foster said he hopes COS has driven home the single most important quality for leadership — never stop learning. In fact, he described that premise as the "whole reason for going to COS." That philosophy was echoed in the motto from Michelangelo used for this year's class: *Ancora Imparo* — "I am still learning." ▲