

*Crucible Essay*

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My crucible began in late 2002, early 2003 at the 960<sup>th</sup> Airborne Air Control Squadron on Okinawa, Japan. Rather than just one event, it was a culmination of several key factors that all played a role and affected me. I will describe the background situation, the set of circumstances that led to the crucible experience, the ways that influenced me and how it will influence me in the future as an organizational leader. It was a time I frequently reflect upon and will likely be with me at least while I continue to serve on active duty.

In order to appreciate how my leadership crucible affected me, I must provide some background. By Christmas 2002, I was a mid-level captain, a Senior Director onboard the E-3 AWACS aircraft and Deputy Chief, Weapons and Tactics for the 960<sup>th</sup> Airborne Air Control Squadron. I returned from deployment that past September and was about five months from permanently changing assignments to Osan Air Base, South Korea. My father had passed away the previous Christmas, and his passing was still very much on my mind. From a personal standpoint, my father's passing made me even more intolerant of inter-squadron games and frivolous interaction in the workplace. At this time approximately half of the squadron was deployed to Prince Sultan Air Base, Saudi Arabia for Operation SOUTHERN WATCH including the Chief, Weapons and Tactics which left me as the acting chief. A new squadron commander had only recently assumed his duties. The Weapons and Tactics shop worked directly for the Director of Operations (DO) who had a six member team of Assistant Directors of Operations (ADO) most of which were O-5s<sup>1</sup>.

In early 2003, North Korea flexed its muscles using a MiG-29 that intercepted a US Air Force aircraft in the Sea of Japan. The US responded by continuing to fly the same type of mission that was intercepted. Fighter escort was added as well as airborne surveillance with AWACS. As Chief, Weapons and Tactics it was my duty to plan how the AWACS would be employed for each mission. As the squadron was short Senior Directors, I also flew the majority of missions in addition to my planning duties, accumulating over 25 missions and over 300 hours. To put that in perspective during a recent 120-

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<sup>1</sup> In Army terms, the Director of Operations is a battalion XO/S-3, and the Weapons and Tactics shop is the main force staff function of the S-3. Additionally, a flight in a squadron is a company in a battalion.

day deployment for Operations Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom, I flew approximately 30 missions and almost 500 hours.

Now that the background events are covered, I will describe the set of circumstances that became my crucible experience. The key players are the new commander, the DO and the ADO cadre'. The DO was the main funnel for all tasks for the squadron from the commander. The squadron filled the Weapons and Tactics shop with the best performers and every task assigned had outstanding results. Unfortunately, this performance made the shop the go-to place for all tasks whether appropriate or not. After months of taking tasks from the DO that should have been delegated to other flights better suited to accomplish them, I approached the DO about the situation. I explained that the majority of the tasks the shop was being tasked for were more appropriate for the other flights to accomplish. He said he appreciated the feedback, and that it made sense to task the flights more appropriately. The next day, Weapons and Tactics was given five inappropriate tasks.

Although the ADO cadre' were predominantly O-5s, the example they set could only be described as dismal at best. There were two to three that could be found asleep at their desks during duty hours. Because I was at a point in my career that could be a turning point to better things or settling for mediocrity, I was hungry for information and mentors that would help point me in the directions I might go for positive career progression. The ADO feedback was vague, often lacked accuracy or relevancy and was typically out-of-date.

The new commander, during the first month of his tenure, was just the opposite of the ADOs. His language was exciting and energizing. He saw a need to provide useful mentorship to the company-grade officers (CGO) and started a mentorship program. Unfortunately, he assigned those duties to the ADOs. In his defense he had only been there a short time, so he had not been able to ascertain their capabilities or inefficiencies. However, as each successive month passed, the squadron saw very little of the commander. Not only did fail to assess the situation in his DO and ADO offices, he never visited the flights or functional shops. To make matters worse, his verbal open-door policy was quickly becoming a dam at his secretary's desk. There seemed to be no way to get communication flowing in both directions.

These events were quite demoralizing. I was only a year away from my Active Duty Service Commitment expiring, and, for the first time, I contemplated getting out of the Air Force. Fortunately, my next assignment was tremendously better, and I spent the next year reflecting on the events of my last months in Okinawa. Each of the key players provided learning points. The DO provided an example of what I liken to a form of toxic leadership. Although toxic leaders are typically described as taking a proactive role in poisoning their organizations, I believe that the absence of any leadership can also be just as toxic to an organization. The DO's inaction taught me to take an active role in the leadership of my unit no matter the level I may be in and to pay attention to my subordinates. This is especially true of my outstanding performers. Typically, people are just looking for effective leadership and will then perform accordingly.

Although the concept of the mentorship program could have contributed to a learning organization environment, the officers executing it effectively killed any learning. They were either unwilling or unable to learn themselves which, in turn, inhibited any chance of the CGO corps underneath them from learning. The far-reaching effect was that the CGOs would likely not be able to develop organizational learning when they made it to positions that could affect such learning. I put this first on the commander, then on the DO, then to other field-grade officers (FGO) who might have recognized the situation. The commander could have assessed his FGOs then assigned those truly capable of providing proper mentorship. Furthermore, he should have taken steps to bring those FGOs that were substandard up to acceptable standards.

The commander's failed program was not only a product of ineffective FGOs, but also his failure to become familiar with his subordinate leaders. With just a few visits to the DO/ADO offices, flights and work centers would have highlighted deficiencies in his squadron. This was the biggest influence on my thoughts for organizational leadership. A leader must know his people and his situation. If his staff is not providing sufficient information, then it is incumbent on the leader to actively find it and imperative to take an active role.

Ultimately, the responsibility of these situations rested on the shoulders of the commander. At my last staff meeting in the squadron, I waited behind in order to speak with him. I spoke of my frustrations and disillusioned feelings from those last months. In a respectful and heartfelt manner, I asked him to be the leader of the squadron and to bring it to a level of excellence I knew it was capable of. These events were not singular, but linked by a background situation beyond them. The crucible experience influenced me at many levels and will provide long-lasting lessons for me to apply to my own leadership.