



By Mark Jacobsen

When I arrived at my first C-17A unit, I was chomping at the bit. Finally, after years of education and training, I was ready to join the fight. The September 11th attacks had occurred during my senior year at USAFA, and I had felt like I was missing out by not serving in Afghanistan and Iraq.

C-17 life could indeed be fantastic. The jet was amazing. I loved my coworkers, who were intelligent, mission-focused, dependable, and a lot of fun. My first C-17 trip was exhilarating: drinking German beer one day, and the next slipping on body armor, a helmet, and night vision goggles before descending into Iraq.

Yet I was also in for a rude awakening. The operations tempo came as a brutal onslaught. My office duties seemed designed purely to satisfy “the system’s” insatiable appetite for new PowerPoint products. Decisions from our C2 organization often seemed nonsensical. I saw colossal amounts of waste due to bureaucratic inefficiencies. As Iraq began its slow

spiral into insurgency and then civil war, my naive idealism eroded. I felt confused, disoriented, and unhappy.

Discontent is a normal part of a military career. I have seen many, many servicemembers undergo a similar process of disenchantment. Some never recover; they descend into cynicism and bitterness, then escape at their first opportunity. Others, however, undergo a transformation. They still feel restless dissatisfaction with the status quo, but they find a kind of inner peace, reframe their journey as a positive quest, and channel their frustrations into a career-long effort to [improve the institution](#).

I eventually realized that discontent is a two-edged blade. It is one of your most important assets, but you have to wield it well.

The Virtue of Discontentment

[One definition](#) of discontentment is a “restless aspiration for improvement.” That is what we are after.

The most important thing you can bring to military service is an ethic of integrity, professionalism, and excellence. You need to do what the institution asks of you, and you need to do it well. Everything builds on that foundation.

The second most important thing you can bring to military service is your discontent. Why? Because discontent is the motivator for the positive change you will introduce throughout your career.

When we are doing what the institution asks of us, we all largely look the same; most modern military forces are based on mass production of needed skill sets. However, our sources of discontentment are deeply personal, the product of our individual temperaments,

interests, and unique life experiences. It is our discontentment—and our thirst for change—that brings our individuality and creativity into our military service. That ambitious individuality, multiplied across the entire military, is the galvanizing force that works against institutional decay, perpetually renews our Armed Forces, and prepares us for uncertain futures.

Discontent with the trench warfare of World War I is what led to revolutions in mechanized and maneuver warfare. Discontent with legacy thinking is what led to further revolutions in airpower, space power, and cyber power. Discontent with toxic leaders drives innumerable NCOs and officers to lead better, and to advocate for innovations in education, training, and evaluations that raise the bar for everyone. Discontent with family strain has fueled advocacy for spouse education benefits, easier cross-state licensing, and more stability and predictability over the course of military careers. Most value-adding innovations began with some individual soul who feels the strain of a problem and imagines ways to do better.

Productively harnessing your discontent is not automatic, however. You must master your discontent, or else it will master you. That means learning to manage your own emotions and steer your discontent into positive avenues of change.

Sources of Discontent

Our “restless aspiration for improvement” can originate in any number of ways. Here are a few that come to mind:

Disappointment: We have such high hopes and excitement for our military careers, but often find the reality different. Any time we encounter a disappointment, we have an opportunity to make military service more invigorating, rewarding, and satisfying.

Underperformance: Military forces train and equip for one purpose: to perform at their

absolute best in war. We should absolutely be discontent with underperformance, because it is a kick in the ass to do better.

Inefficiencies: Nothing is more infuriating to ambitious high-performers than bogging down in wasteful inefficiencies. Unfortunately, these are endemic in government organizations that are highly bureaucratic, overregulated, and lack market incentives.

Misalignments: Modern military forces are incredibly complex, with thousands of synchronized parts. Building such an organization takes decades, and change takes time. That means the organization always lags behind the world. It frequently falls out of alignment, creating dangerous gaps-whether we are talking about evolving technologies, new organizational management constructs, or the shifting nature of family and social life for our troops. Our discontent is a summons to bring our organization into line with the modern world.

Abuses: Unfortunately, particular leaders or organizations can do great emotional or even physical violence to their members. Sometimes these abuses are deliberate, perpetrated by toxic leaders, bullies, or sexual predators. Other times they are structural, such as unconscious racism or sexism. Our discontent calls us to speak for victims, remedy injustices, and stop malevolence.

Stages of Discontent

Discontent progresses through stages, like a mountain ascent. You have to climb through each stage to arrive at the next. A continued ascent is never guaranteed; many people reach a particular stage but do not advance further.

Helplessness: When you first encounter frustrations, you feel like the system is unimaginably powerful and therefore unchangeable. You look for individuals to blame, often commanders or staffs who “don’t get it.” You complain about how stupid and broken

everything is, but could not even begin to articulate a fix.

Understanding: You begin to understand **why** these frustrations exist. You realize there is often no one to blame, because so many problems are structural—originating in miscommunications, broken processes, perverse incentives, or other bureaucratic realities. You begin to appreciate how much work has gone into the existing system, and the problems that it does solve. You might not have solutions yet, but you sense the **kinds** of changes that need to occur.

Solutioneering: As you master your career field and gain a deeper understanding of how your organization works, you see possibilities for specific, actionable improvements. At this stage you may not know how to actually implement these changes; your confidence and skills are still developing.

Communication: Now you step into the arena. You write a white paper, blog post, or journal article. You brief a commander or pitch at an innovation competition. If you do it well, you show an expert understanding of the problem and articulate specific, compelling solutions. A conversation begins, allies (and enemies) appear, and your idea gets challenged and evolves. A coalition begins to take shape.

Execution: After all those years, everything comes together. You have a deep understanding of a specific problem, and an actionable proposal that has benefited from vigorous discussion. You have an audience, and a coalition that wants your proposal to succeed. Now you learn the fine art of walking an idea through the bureaucracy, winning the support of the right leaders, garnering resources, and navigating and possibly changing regulations.

If you reach the summit, you will look down and see that your discontent—your restless aspiration for improvement—has culminated in a real change. You will also realize that you

are not alone; an entire expedition team stands with you.

Once you reach that summit, the journey continues. After that first victory, you will chase other sources of discontent, finding other opportunities to improve things. As a leader, you will want to help others make their own ascents. You might even rearchitect your organization to make such ascents a routine part of organizational life.

Managing Your Ascent

Harnessing your discontent is not an easy journey. There will always be plenty to love about military service, but the frank reality is that negative energy is often what drives progress—the dissatisfaction again, the thirst for something to be different.

Learning to manage that negative energy is one of your most important battles, because there are so many ways it can hurt you.

First, develop inner disciplines to manage your own psychology. This is a major theme in [my other writings](#) mainly because it is a major theme in my life. Staying committed to a large organization can be exhausting, and you will have days when negative thoughts and emotions flood in. The challenges only compound as you make your ascent, because each stage introduces new pressures and difficulties. Negative emotions will overrun you if you let them, undermining your effectiveness, your leadership, and your personal happiness. Many wise leaders have gone before you, and have developed an arsenal of techniques to manage their inner journeys. Learn from them. You want to lead from a place of inner centeredness that brings peace, confidence, and satisfaction.

Second, always strive to keep climbing through the stages. Moving through each stage takes time, practice, and experience. Keep forging ahead. Whatever you do, don't get stuck in helplessness. Bitching and moaning can be cathartic sometimes, but if that is the sum of your legacy, your military service was too small.

Third, know when and how to take your rests. A restless aspiration for improvement can deplete you, especially when you are fighting hard, sustained battles. You need to replenish by focusing on whatever or whoever gives you energy, joy, and meaning. That can come through family, friends, work, spirituality, nature, books, hobbies, service, or almost anything else.

Fourth, take your journey in community. The greatest joy in military service is the series of relationships you form along the way. At every stage, you will find mentors further ahead in the journey. Learn from them. You will also build a network of like-minded peers. Finally, mentor others. When you see subordinates or peers feeling helpless, coax them along the journey; help them develop the understanding and skills they will need going forward.

Conclusion

Mastering your discontent, and steering all that energy into productive change, is an essential part of your journey through military service. It is also essential for life. You can apply the same framework and skills to the private sector, your relationships, and other aspects of your life.

Discontent is a guiding compass that points to your unique insights and offerings. Discontent is your gift to the world, but only if you let it be.

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