



by Andrew Klinger

I was both excited and anxious the day I got my orders to Minot Air Force Base. I requested to be sent to a nuclear missile base because of the challenges and opportunities the mission presented. Every day, Airmen at Minot and its sister nuclear missile bases operate, maintain, and secure weapons that have an immediate and direct impact on US strategic policy. The thought of leading those Airmen was awesome but also daunting. In the weeks leading up to my first day in Minot, I was concerned with whether I had what it took to be the right leader in my unit. Unsure of what to do, I simply decided that I would approach everything with optimism and enthusiasm.

In time, I found (miraculously) my plan to simply throw my energy and passion into the job actually worked. I had a great relationship with my commander, my airmen appreciated my effort (or at least found their lieutenant's attitudes novel/humorous), and I worked well with

my peers to accomplish the mission. As a reward for my efforts, I was given an extremely unique opportunity that was the highlight of my time at Minot; the nuclear weapons convoy mission.

It was a major change of pace for me. I had my own unique vehicle fleet, command and control systems, specialized weapons, and an entire flight of hand-picked airmen. I also had to take responsibility for my own mission tasking and planning, work independently, and ensure the dozens of different agencies involved in every convoy were working in harmony with each other. But by far the biggest change for me was that I suddenly found myself with a significant degree of authority and responsibility to accomplish a mission that had very real consequences on US strategic policy.

What I humbly share here are the lessons I learned from long, cold days on the road, ensuring the safe and secure transport of the world's most destructive weapons. They were hard-won lessons delivered to me in the form of long nights, strange situations, and a desire to do right by the most talented and motivated airmen in the Air Force. I hope these lessons help the next round of lieutenant's taking up the watch in the great, wide north.

1-Calm Down

Perhaps my biggest lesson, which was taught to me time after time, was the most important thing I could do in any sort of situation was remain calm. Your troops will reflect your attitude. If you panic, they will panic and start making poor decisions. Their panic will be mirrored and then amplified down the chain. But if you remain cool and calm, your troops will try to emulate your attitude even if they are upset internally. When you talk over the radio, speak clearly and calmly. When you give orders, act naturally and with confidence.

Low emotional neuroticism is what you should seek within yourself. This trait does not mean that you have to be an unfeeling robot as that would be just as bad as being an emotionally

reactive person. You should figure out what your “trigger moments” are and then seek to balance your emotions in front of your troops. Remember, don’t sweat the small stuff.

2-Learn to Let Go of Control

Many will find this ironic, but one of the keys to successfully moving a nuclear weapon is to actually let go of control. Not control of the weapon of course, but rather control of the programs and processes that surround the mission. I quickly discovered a nuclear weapons convoy had way too many moving pieces to effectively manage on my own. As a result, I had to rely heavily on my NCOs to manage these moving pieces on my behalf. I did this by providing a clear, guiding intent for their programs and squads, and then giving them as much freedom and power as I could to let them achieve that intent.

While it seems like common sense leadership advice to trust your NCOs, it is still very hard to let go of things that you know you will have to answer for if they go wrong. But trust me, it will work out. We have the most talented airmen in the world and they will find great solutions to the unit’s problems, even if it is not the solution you envisioned.

3-Don’t Let Yourself Get Tribal

As stated before, moving a nuclear weapon across North Dakota requires the coordination of dozens of different units and agencies. It is truly a whole-base effort and a fantastic example of the bigger Air Force in action. This kind of mission requires that the various participants act selflessly to become a “team of teams.”

While unit morale and esprit-de-corps are must haves in any military unit, it should never come at the expense of cooperation with other friendly forces or devolve into petty rivalries. Unfortunately, too often leaders tend to destroy the larger picture under the delusion that we they looking out for our tribe. I had an obligation to build relationships with partner units, learn their processes, and make the whole-base effort happen in order for the nuclear convoy mission to succeed. If you always think in terms of “them” versus “us”, you will find

it's only "us" in the fight and no "them" will be coming to save you.

4-Give Your Leadership the Information They Need

Because of the nature of the position, I frequently found myself in meetings and discussions that other lieutenants were not normally allowed to participate in. I was also the subject matter expert for a very high visibility mission, and thus officers and commanders who were much more senior to me looked to me for my honest opinions on issues that affected the convoy. When questions about the risks involved in a particular mission came up, the heads in the room would turn to me to help determine the outcome (a feeling that I never got used to).

When you do find yourself in a situation where senior leaders want your viewpoint, be respectful and honest. It is your responsibility to provide your leadership with truthful answers and to do so in a way that is not antagonistic. At the same time, you must also be willing to accept your leadership's decisions based on the information you provide. Trust goes both ways. My leadership trusted me to lead the convoy mission and I trusted them to make decisions on those missions that would keep me and my Airmen safe.

5-Embrace Failure and Avoid Fear

I once read in a history class that a popular saying in the old Strategic Air Command was "to err is human, to forgive is not SAC policy." While that may sound clever and certainly carries the bravado of General Curtis LeMay with it (the founder of SAC and the modern nuclear Air Force), I can tell you that zero forgiveness makes for an abysmal unit culture.

If you refuse to accept failure while learning from it, you will create a unit culture where members are afraid to come forward, speak up, or sound the alarm to major problems. Your troops will hide things from you, and that type of behavior is what gets people hurt or killed. Show your airmen, through both action and words, honest mistakes are forgiven and embraced as a learning opportunity.

6-Have Fun

During my entire time at Minot, I made it a point to find the bright side of things and enjoy my job. Like any duty station or mission series, Minot had its fair share of challenges. There is no way to sugarcoat the experience of having to walk out into sub-freezing temperatures and still get the work done. Yet when these situations happened, I looked to others to keep a good attitude and make the best of the situation. I was always able to find a reason to laugh or smile (even if icicles started to gather on my face).

You too can find success with something as simple as finding a reason to smile more often or to laugh at stupid, silly things. Staying calm in front of your airmen can have a similar effect to having a happy attitude and can be contagious in a unit.

I am grateful to the proud Defenders of the 91st Missile Security Operations Squadron who were patient with me as I worked to develop the mission, the airmen, and myself. In the face of -20 degree temperatures and a demanding nuclear mission, they chose to follow me in giving their all towards building a lethal, combat-ready team.

Andrew is an Air Force Security Forces officer currently assigned to Buckley Garrison, US Space Force, Colorado. He oversees base security operations for the installation. He loves taking road trips with his wife and dog, snowboarding beautiful mountains, and enjoying great Colorado beer.

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