



by Ben Durdle

Our education plants the seed of our perceived exceptionalism, our training waters it, and our experiences prune and bathe it in sunlight. We have signed up to do something extraordinary and believing we are capable and, in many ways, exceptional, is a valuable characteristic to possess.

Unfortunately, as our careers progress, the gap between feeling exceptional and expecting exceptional treatment often closes. We often feel our service owes us something because of who we are. Our professional worldview contorts to attribute every misstep and missed opportunity to a concerted effort to subvert our progress. *Don't they know what a great service member I am?* Cynicism becomes our primary lens and we forget a central tenet of service:

You are not the point.

Our duty is to lift up others. To drive the mission forward. To inspire action. To stand between our team and the swirling storm of pessimism that is all-too-common in our profession. Our story is bigger than us and when we place ourselves at the center of it the supporting cast can only be one-dimensional caricatures. Our ego must not blind us to our duty.

The military is a massive bureaucracy and its actions rarely align with our personal ambitions. Cynicism, gossip, and excuses come easy; committing time, following through, and giving others the benefit of the doubt is difficult. But if victimhood at the hands of an

organization is the primary lens through which you view your service then you will fail. Your team will fail. The mission will fail.

Remember: you are not the point.

I have to confess, I must constantly remind myself of this. I have spent a career as an intelligence professional in the U.S. Air Force and my ego drove me to put myself at the center of every organization I have been a part of. Early success convinced me I deserved exceptional treatment and, when it was repeatedly denied, it drove a deep wedge between me and my service.

It took stepping out of my career field and serving as an instructor with an Air Force ROTC detachment for three years for me to recognize this tendency in myself and how destructive it had been for not only my career, but also my health, my relationships, and ability to grow as a leader. Cadets do not care about your career ambitions - they care about the unlimited possibilities in front of them and how to genuinely lead well. They also have an incredibly accurate sense of honesty. Getting up in front of future officers every day forced me to seriously reflect on my own service, what I value, and to realize none of this is about me.

I will forever be grateful to my cadets for teaching me this lesson. At every future assignment there will be a reminder hanging at my desk that reads:

You are not the point.

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*Editor's Note: In June, we asked our [From the Green Notebook](#) community a simple but profound question: What's the one thing you wish you would have known before you started your last assignment? This week, we are pleased to share the nuggets of wisdom leaders have learned with the hope that it doesn't have to be relearned by someone else the hard way.*

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