



by Benjamin Van Horrick

To the incoming class, welcome to Fort Leavenworth and the United States Army Combined Arms Center Command and General Staff College (CGSC). You are embarking on the most pivotal—and certainly not the easiest—year of your life.

CGSC serves as both a hammock for deep reflection and a trampoline for your career and life outside of uniform. As a mid-career professional, you have been granted a year by your service to improve yourself. Most will stick to the curriculum. However, if you want to maximize your experience at CGSC, you might choose to author a thesis, which equips you for the growing demands of our profession. Whether you selected the general studies, history, or war-gaming track, the exercise of conceiving, researching, and composing a thesis is an endurance exercise. The thesis becomes secondary to the shift in your mindset as you shatter preconceived limits on your ability.

Two of the most powerful tools a field grade officer will employ are influencing decision-

making and coalition-building. CGSC requires those drafting a thesis to build a three-person thesis committee that includes a terminal degree holder (Ph.D.) who will guide and shape the thesis. The exercise of building a thesis committee prepares a CGSC student for the demands of managing external stakeholders. The opportunity to develop the skills of influencing and coalition-building are even more rewarding than penning the thesis. Interaction with the committee forces the author to receive and integrate feedback on each chapter in a compressed timeline. The iterative feedback process mirrors a high-level joint staff, where civilians and military officers shape products and help the commander make an informed decision.

Simply stated, drafting a thesis at CGSC affords a field grade officer with the experience of managing relationships, receiving feedback, and improving their work while building a coalition. These skills are invaluable when you transition as a field grade officer into key development billets and beyond.

Managing a thesis at CGSC is much like having a child in that the thesis requires daily care. The author of a thesis, much like a parent, will experience a range of emotions. Composing the thesis while managing the course demands your time and best effort. In addition, your family will deserve your best, and you must maintain physical readiness. Placing a new demand on your time forces adaptation. A deadline on a chapter improves your time management, forcing you to outline your work, synthesize your research, and compose a cogent response.

Taking a knee for a year at CGSC comes at a cost often not realized until later in one's career. The cost is not taking advantage of the time you have at CGSC to work hard and significantly develop yourself intellectually and mentally. Field grade officers who stop growing while they are at CGSC will regress and find themselves marginalized by their respective services.

The events of the past two years show that field grade officers cannot afford a year of stagnation or regression.

Rising tensions with Iran, the COVID-19 pandemic, domestic social unrest, an increasingly aggressive China, and Russia's invasion of Ukraine place field grade officers in a critical position. The operational demands we face demand a year of growth at CGSC. One can develop without penning a thesis, but composing one is the best way to maximize personal growth and provide long-term value to the service.

The people who benefit the most from your thesis are those you will lead in the future. You

will ask your future charges to continue their personal growth and education. You can offer your advice or set the example. People forget advice, but examples endure.

Composing a thesis is an arduous yet meaningful experience you can leverage in the future while training, coaching, and mentoring peers and subordinates alike. The bound copy of the thesis will remain on your shelf, while your example will permeate your future command. This year of life can make that future a reality for you and those who will rely on you.

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