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Leading the Way: XIV - The Myth of "But I was told"

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Or: Tradition ... Tradition!¹

The Ignorant

If you're reading this document, you probably don't fit the profile, but I am sure that sometime in your CAP Career, you will meet this person. Ignorant literally means "lacking knowledge." In this context, we're going to use the term a bit differently.

Ignorant people don't read. They may read the leadership or aerospace texts to pass a test, but they don't read. It would never occur to an ignorant person to sit down and read CAPR 52-16. Ignorant Cadets rely on an Oral History or Tradition to define what is "right." Everything from how to salute, the requirements for promotion, how to wear a uniform, how to drill – Ignorant Cadets learn these things in Phase I/II and then teach them to their subordinates.



What happens next can split in two directions. If the Cadet learned the wrong thing in Phase I/II, in Phase III the Cadet Officer will teach the wrong thing at encampment. His Cadets go home and teach the same thing. Ten years later, it's a Tradition, and everyone in the entire wing is doing it wrong. If the Cadet Officer learned the right thing, he will teach it "right" [or close enough], but he will also teach his people to rely on memory instead of referring to the regulations. This will essentially encourage the next generation to do the same thing.

A few Examples

At one time in Michigan Wing, at the position of "At Ease", hands were placed in the small of the back. At "Parade Rest", they rested naturally. This is, of course, the exact opposite of how the Marine Corps and Army do it. The US Air Force makes no distinction in hand placement between "At Ease" and "Parade Rest." However, someone learned it from some officer they deeply respected, and it somehow became a tradition.

Think of the implications when an officer says "I don't care what AFR 36-2203 says; we've always done it this way." Imagine if they said that about CAPR 52-16 (Cadet Programs), or 52-10. (Cadet Protection) Think that we can "know when it's important and when it's not"?

Think again.

In one squadron, nearly everyone was ignorant. The commander would issue orders, and no one would check to see if he had the authority to give them. They just assumed. So, when the Commander started having camp-outs and doing things specifically forbidden by the regulations, no one noticed. Now, no Cadets were ever physically injured or abused, and [in the opinion of the author] no Cadet was ever put in any great danger. Still, the Commander violated the regulations, and the law, for that matter. Five years later, there are currently two members of that squadron who are allowed to remain members in CAP.

Stopping a Climate of Traditions

Stopping this starts at home. Read the Regs. Be the local "expert." Teach your subordinates that when you don't know the answer, look it up in regs. When you know the answer, but you're not 100% sure, look it up in the regs. Sometimes, when you run into local traditions, your commander may make it clear that hey, it's only the placement of hands in Parade Rest, and when it Rome ...

You may have to put up with that to be a good example of Military Discipline. Just make sure that when you're the boss, things don't work that way.

Reading regs without understanding real military traditions can cause problems as well. Not too many years ago, a Senior Member somehow got the idea that all Juniors were supposed to salute all Senior Officers when they approached. In other words, if a Colonel is talking to a Captain and a Major approaches, the Captain should salute the Major.

Think about that for a second. The Captain Salutes the Major, but, meanwhile, the Major is busy saluting the Colonel. The Colonel drops his salute, the Major drops his, THEN the Captain can drop his. Or wait, does the Major then have to return the Salute of the Captain? Or does he sorta face in the middle of the two of them, so they both count at the same time? Add a few more players to the equation, and realize how silly it gets. All this because a CAP Senior Member without grade [and all of 3 months of experience] managed to influence some Cadet Officers to see things her way. How was it solved? An enterprising Cadet Officer looked up the history of the Salute, and the idea that "You do not salute a Duke in the presence of the King", and explained how that applied to today. When the issue came up at encampment and the Cadet Commander said "But SM Smith wants it like this", the Cadet Officer said "Yes, but you know what's right, and if SM Smith has any questions, she can ask ME about it." That tradition was killed before it could get started.

Only the Regulations

Granted, there may actually be a time when something happens that isn't covered by the regs. For example, the Uniform Manual didn't use to allow civilian jackets, yet when Cadets are cold ... that's better than frostbite. Sometimes, in extreme cases [like personal safety], the commander may have to make a decision to ignore the regulations.

I would hold that the only time this is valid is when the regulation itself violates common sense in that situation. In other words, after the encampment, when the Encampment Commander sits down with the Wing & Region Commander and explains the situation, the room had better be full of heads bobbing "yes" and agreement. Otherwise, the Encampment commander might be in a bit of a spot. For example, if the Encampment Commander said "I authorized a forrest-green shoulder cord to be worn on BDU's by the Cadet Command staff because it looks cool", that's probably not going to fly.

Conclusions

1. Know the regs.
2. Do what they say.
3. Teach others to do likewise.
4. If it doesn't make sense, do what's right – but you had better be able to justify it.
5. There's a word for folks that live on the traditions of men instead of the directives of higher authority – that word is "WRONG."

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Footnotes:

1. Yes, The Fiddler On the Roof

Matt Heusser was a CAP cadet for most of the 1990's, spending most of his "cadet-hood" in the Maryland Wing. Moving to Michigan four months prior to his 21st birthday, his oddest feeling was the day he woke up, saw the uniform with the three diamonds hanging in his closet, and realized that he would never wear it again. Currently, he's a Leadership Officer in Michigan Wing's Boule-Norman Cadet Squadron, specializing in military skills, Drill Team and applied leadership. He's available by email at Matthew.Heusser@mks.net.

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