

# Reflections on Core Values

Gen Michael E. Ryan

The first discussions I recall about core values were in the late 1980s. It certainly wasn't the first time we talked about values—we've been focused on character and values as long as I can remember—but the effort to specifically define and institutionalize Air Force core values gained momentum about 10 years ago.

The first shot at defining core values highlighted six of them: Courage, Patriotism, Integrity, Competence, Tenacity, and Service. Each represented an important aspect of serving in the Air Force. And we began teaching those values in basic military training, in our commissioning programs, in professional military education, and across the Air Force.

Over time we discovered that the six values we'd initially defined didn't hang together very well. Each had validity in itself, but they were difficult to bring together in any meaningful way. Not surprising. It would be rare to hit the bull's-eye on the first shot with an endeavor like this. So in the mid-1990s, we synthesized the six core values into three: *Integrity First*, *Service Before Self*, *Excellence in All We Do*. For our Air Force, these core values have become a constant we can depend on in a changing world.

Core values help those who join us understand right from the outset what's expected of them. Equally important, they provide all of us, from airman to four-star general, with a touchstone—a guide in our own conscience—to remind us of what we expect from ourselves. We have wonderful people in the Air Force. But we aren't perfect. Frequent reflection on the core values helps each of us refocus on the person we want to be and the example we want to set.

These values weren't invented in some seminar—they're rooted in our heritage and in our experience. They reflect the best of ourselves—our highest common denominator. They're worth thinking about and talking about—because thinking about them and talking about them will help us live them.

## Integrity First

*Integrity First*—the foundation of trust. And trust is the unbreakable bond that unifies the force. Trust enables everything that we do—trust that when a job is signed off, it's

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complete and it's right. Trust that when a wingman says he's got you covered, you're covered. It's trust that allows each of us to concentrate our energy on doing our job, knowing those around us are doing theirs. It's trust that makes us effective. And it's integrity that underpins trust.

In simple terms, *Integrity First* means doing the right thing—even when it's uncomfortable, even when it's hard. A few years ago, a group of Medal of Honor recipients gathered at Air War College to speak to the class. They shared their experiences. Each experience was very different. But these heroes had one thing in common—a firm commitment to the importance of doing the right thing.

Now-retired Col Joe Jackson faced up to doing the right thing in 1968 when the call came for a volunteer to rescue three Americans who had inadvertently been left behind when an airstrip was overrun by nearly 6,000 North Vietnamese regulars. He was overhead at 9,000 feet in an unarmed transport and knew that landing on that strip to pick up the three was extraordinarily hazardous. But, he said, "I was obsessed with doing the right thing, even though it took all the courage I had to dive into that hostile enemy fire along the airstrip."<sup>1</sup> We applaud the skill that allowed Colonel Jackson to pull off this difficult mission. But even more, we applaud his determination to do what was right, despite the very real risk to his own life.

This is more than just an example of heroism. It's an example of the importance of trust. The trust that they would not be abandoned allowed these three men to focus on doing their jobs instead of worrying about saving themselves. And their focus on doing their jobs allowed hundreds of others to be safely evacuated from the airstrip.

There are thousands of less dramatic examples that take place around us at our bases every day. Air Force people—from maintenance-arming crews to finance professionals—skip the shortcuts and do the right thing, even when it isn't easy. And in doing so, they build the trust that makes us effective.

## Service Before Self

*Service Before Self*—the essence of our commitment to the nation. It is this mutual commitment that binds the war-fighting team. The commitment is founded in the oaths that we take, and is exemplified in large and small ways around us every day.

Airman John Levitow offered a dramatic example of selflessness as, despite wounds, he threw himself on a burning

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flare in the back of an airplane full of munitions. Capt Lance Sijan's unbreakable determination to resist enemy torture and keep faith with his country during his time as a POW was an equally heroic example.

But examples of *Service Before Self* are not limited to Medal of Honor recipients. There are powerful examples at every base, every day. Not long ago, the area around Grand Forks Air Force Base, North Dakota, was submerged in a devastating flood. Airmen were forced to evacuate like everyone else. But instead of worrying about themselves and their homes that were under water, they put their families in shelters and went to work. Helicopter pilots may have had to borrow flight suits and boots, but they flew almost 50 medical evacuations of threatened citizens in one weekend alone. Base firefighters drove through five-foot waters to get to the center of town and spend nine hours fighting a major fire. And, with city water shut down due to contamination, civil engineers found a way not only to generate and pump over a million gallons a day to meet base needs, they also pumped a million gallons a day back to the city to meet their needs.

Airmen who serve selflessly inspire mutual support from everyone they touch. And that mutual support makes us a more effective team.

### **Excellence in All We Do**

*Excellence in All We Do*—a commitment to high standards in serving our country. The application of modern aerospace power is an extraordinarily complex endeavor. It requires the seamless integration of hundreds, and often thousands, of airmen. And each must perform to high standards for the mission to succeed. As last year's Operation Allied Force demonstrated, our airmen do that routinely and do it superbly.

This commitment to high standards is contagious. Each year we recognize 12 outstanding airmen for their passion for excellence. Their contributions inspire us all. They represent a broad cross-section of career fields—from recruiting to fire fighting, and from security to space and missile maintenance. But every one of them has one thing in common—excellence.

While the 12 outstanding airmen are emblems of excellence, they'd be the first to tell you that they didn't succeed alone. Their accomplishments are a result of their own commitment, combined with the skill and dedication of those around them.

That commitment to excellence is more than desirable; in the profession of arms, it's essential. Lives depend on the fact that we maintain high standards—high standards in the way we do our jobs, high standards in the way we take care of our equipment, high standards in the way we take care of our facilities—high standards across the board. Those high standards put meaning to the phrase: "America's Air Force . . . No One Comes Close."

### **The Challenge**

The challenge for each of us is not just to understand our Air Force core values. It is to live them. Not in some phony "holier than thou" way—people see through that—but in a conscious choice to do our best each day, to live up to *Integrity First*, *Service Before Self*, and *Excellence in All We Do*. And as we do, we'll build on the trust that makes us a great team, a great family—a great Air Force.

### **Notes**

1. Col Joe M. Jackson, address to the Air War College, 10 May 1996.