

# “Sir, I Assume Command”

Col Peter A. Land

With those words of the title and an exchange of salutes, I began the most challenging, frustrating, rewarding, satisfying, aggravating, broadening, and time-consuming job of my Air Force career. As base commander of Scott Air Force Base (AFB), Illinois, I was at the helm of the 375th Air Base Group—1,500 military and civilian personnel. I was charged with the responsibility of operating and maintaining an installation with physical assets valued at more than \$615 million and of supporting some 22,000 people who lived, worked, and played there. We supported Headquarters Military Airlift Command (MAC) and Headquarters Air Force Communications Command with 15 general officers residing on base.

As base commander I learned a number of lessons, some of which may prove useful to others assuming command of a major organization. I would like to discuss how one gets up to speed quickly in such a job, then share some thoughts on my philosophy of command, and finally track a few typical problems one may encounter.

How does a person who has never commanded anything assume such a position only three days after arrival on base? There is no formal break-in period; the full responsibilities transfer to you on the effective date of the assumption of command orders. However, from a practical standpoint there is a brief honeymoon period when your boss and subordinates and the public expect you to “learn the territory.” Unfortunately, from the outset, you are under close scrutiny by everyone. The people have a natural expectation that the “new kid on the block” will do something positive relatively soon to improve the organization. I have found that several new commanders fell into this trap because of the pressure to “take command and do something spectacular.” My challenge was simply—“How do I learn the job quickly and cre-

ate a positive impression on my people without doing something dumb on day one?”

One advantage I had was having spent three years as the director of management consultation at the Leadership and Management Development Center, Maxwell AFB, Alabama. In that capacity, I worked closely with many senior commanders in diagnosing and solving organizational problems; therefore, I had a feel for the role of a base commander. However, there were some preparatory actions I took which may be useful if you are scheduled to take command without the luxury of having served as a deputy or vice commander.

Before departing Maxwell AFB en route to Scott AFB, I visited with the Maxwell base commander. I attended his staff meetings, followed him around for a few afternoons, and made orientation visits to each of the major functional areas under his supervision, such as civil engineering, personnel, security police, and disaster preparedness. I also chatted with a few Air War College and Air Command and Staff College students who had recently completed tours at Scott AFB.

The Base Commander’s Management Course (BCMC) is a four-week program designed to prepare prospective base commanders and deputy base commanders for their jobs. Since it is taught at Maxwell, I managed to attend a few classes and scrounged copies of their handouts, which gave detailed information on the various functions of air base groups and combat support groups. Many evenings were spent studying the BCMC information. When questions developed, I called the local base functional expert for clarification.

I contacted the Scott AFB Public Affairs Office and requested several back issues of the base newspaper and asked them to send a copy each week until I moved to Scott. One can learn much about a base by studying the base newspaper in detail. The point is that considerable information may be available at your present base pertaining to a command position you are scheduled to assume.

During the three-day overlap with the incumbent, he offered candid views of the strengths and weaknesses of the organization. He introduced me to my new boss, my deputy and staff, as well as selected key people, including certain civilian dignitaries. In the evenings I read recent correspondence files and reviewed the base and wing regulations and operating instructions. I took driving tours of the base with a map to become familiar with major facilities, street names, and key areas.

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After the change of command ceremony, I met with the command section—deputy, executive officer, and our two secretaries. I stressed that the deputy would be advising me heavily, and they could expect me to follow his advice in most cases. I think it is important to develop a close team spirit among the staff in your immediate office complex—good, open communications and trust are essential elements of command.

That same evening I had dinner with my boss, the wing commander. I asked what he expected from me and my organization, what was important, and what issues were politically sensitive. It is absolutely essential to get all the cards on the table as soon as possible—'tis far better than finding the jokers the hard way.

Within a few days I had appointments to pay courtesy calls on each general officer on base. The thrust of my remarks was mainly social, but I asked, "What can the base do to serve you and your organization better?" They seemed to appreciate an active willingness to serve and listen, and my visits also established good rapport that proved later to be invaluable when problems and sensitive issues were raised.

Perhaps the toughest aspect of commanding an organization with which you have had little experience is becoming technically knowledgeable and competent to discuss issues or make decisions. Headquarters MAC has a Commander's Orientation Program that includes briefings not only from each functional directorate and an assessment of its function on Scott AFB but on MAC policy as well. These briefings are very helpful in providing background on certain critical issues.

Next was a formal introduction to the air base group. The functional orientation used was taken, in part, from a command transition model used in the US Army; I adapted it to my situation. For sake of simplicity, I will discuss the civil engineering orientation as an example of how I approached every function under my supervision. The first step was to study recent management effectiveness inspection and staff assistance visit reports concerning civil engineering. I also reviewed my notes from my orientation briefing presented by Headquarters MAC Civil Engineering.

The next step was to obtain an organizational-functional chart of civil engineering, including the names of key personnel. I asked the base civil engineer to get his staff together and prepare a formal in-brief to be presented in his conference room with key staff present. I stressed that they cover any subject they felt appropriate, but I wanted the following topics addressed as a minimum:

- mission,
- concept of operation,
- manning situation,
- financial status,
- main customer population,
- feedback systems from customer population,
- greatest challenges,
- goals and objectives,

- major achievements,
- key coordinating units,
- training program, and
- base commander's role.

I have found that when a staff discusses its mission, goals, and objectives, teamwork and communications tend to improve. Perhaps the greatest benefit of my orientation was realized in the unit during the preparation for my visit—that was one of my main objectives.

Suppose we look briefly at each of these topics to see why they were selected.

*Mission.* Reviewing the mission statement reinforces a unit's purpose and gives meaning to the efforts of all assigned personnel. When discussing the unit's mission, I also stressed that we have an implied mission to develop our people professionally while accomplishing the stated mission.

*Concept of operation.* I wanted an overview of how the unit performed its mission; this helped me to see the "how" of an organization. I was looking for broad processes, not detailed procedures.

*Manning situation.* In addition to learning the total numbers of authorized as opposed to assigned personnel, I was equally concerned with grade structure, skill levels, and overall experience and quality of supervision. These are key factors in determining a unit's organizational maturity.

*Financial status.* A few pointed questions can disclose what active controls are established to track and reduce costs. What are the valued incentives to demonstrate skilled financial management at unit level?

*Main customer population.* If a unit is in the support business, such as an air base group, determining the major users of a particular service being provided is helpful. For example, the base chapel serves the entire family, with the majority of its flock coming from families quartered on base.

*Feedback systems.* "What systems or procedures are there to learn from your main customer population whether they feel you are meeting their needs?" On occasion, a staff assistance visit may result in praise of your housekeeping and paperwork, but the key question is, "Are you actually accomplishing your service mission?" A feedback system will help answer that question.

*Greatest challenges.* "What does the corporate body see as the greatest challenges of the next six to twelve months?" Developing this phase of the briefing helped set standards of excellence and improved teamwork. This is the platform on which action plans are built.

*Goals and objectives.* This is similar to challenges except that goals are more positive and tend to stimulate creativity. People tend to set more ambitious goals for themselves than those that are imposed from above.

*Major achievements.* Citing major achievements stimulates pride if the record has been good or fosters humility if there is not much to boast about. (I make mental notes to comment on as I visit the individual in his work area.)

*Key coordinating units.* The commander has a special responsibility to ensure there is a positive relationship between key coordinating units. For example, the interaction between the legal office and the security police is critical to the administration of discipline. On occasion, the nonverbal cues can suggest problems when an organization describes its key coordinating units. That is one area to fix quickly—teamwork and mutual support are essential.

*Training program.* A unit's long-term performance is usually as good as its training program. Key supervisory support for training can be spotted quickly; ensure that there is an aggressive, well-organized, honest training program with the commander or director heavily involved, it will pay big dividends in performance and morale.

*Base commander's role.* The final question I ask is, "If this unit could control 100 percent of the base commander's time, in what order of priority would you list things you would have me do to assist in your mission?" The units usually prepared a "dream sheet" of duties and services I could perform to support them. After an orientation visit to each functional area, I selected the most important duties from each list and made a determined effort to organize them into my work schedule. Such a plan made for a busy day, but my people developed a stronger conception that I was working on their behalf.

After completing the orientation briefing, the squadron commander or functional manager would escort me on a walking tour of the entire unit. I sought to shake hands with every member of the air base group. During the visits I was prepared to chat somewhat knowledgeably about their concepts of operation and compliment them on recent major achievements. Since first impressions tend to be lasting, I found the orientation plan helped me get off to a positive start fairly quickly.

Over the years, I have observed many commanders at close range. Both positive and negative examples and considerable study have shaped my own personal philosophy of command.

## **Train and Delegate**

Effective delegation is great therapy for most Air Force organizations. By applying generous doses of time, training, and trust—the three Ts—you can move the focus of decision making down the organization. This practice gets your people involved and frees senior officers for handling the bigger issues. You must let your people know what is expected. You must send a clear, consistent message to your staff indicating what you expect in terms of standards and professional excellence—that you expect them to be experts in their field. Early in the game, I passed along the critical points my boss shared with me. Doing so helped my staff understand the pressures I was experiencing; it helped them understand my decision process.

When I had an experienced and mature staff, I tasked for performance in mission-oriented terms; I was not much con-

cerned with methods. This opened an avenue of creativity for them to find better ways of getting the job done. I stressed with equal vigor the responsibility everyone shared in developing subordinates. I frequently asked the colonels,—"What have you done recently to help your lieutenants grow?" This subtle pressure served to reinforce professional standards for the senior officers and tended to motivate the junior officers to learn the business more thoroughly.

The open-door policy has become military dictum, but I modified it slightly. My door was open to my staff for informal discussions on problems they were wrestling with in their units. The relationship was that of a coach and player. I rapped with them without giving orders or making the decisions. They could use my experience and background as a nonjudgmental sounding board. If they gave me the problem to solve, I would become a victim of "reverse delegation," which runs counter to our goal of decentralization and subordinate development. This relationship took time to develop, but it provided me a window into the unit and a firsthand view of the subordinate's judgment, values, and decision-making skills.

One other point should be noted with regard to delegating decision making and action to the lowest level. There are a few situations in which the base commander should be actively involved at the lower-level unit. For example, the headquarters section commander is normally a junior officer with administrative command over enlisted personnel working for senior officers. On occasion, the enlisted personnel have divided loyalties, and, of course, the senior supervisor usually wins out. The base commander needs to do some "down-field blocking" and lend position power to support the headquarters section commanders.

## **Positive Reinforcement**

The old adage "You spend 90 percent of your time on 10 percent of your people" is true since the chronic troublemakers seem to demand a disproportionate share of a supervisor's time. Consequently, there are only a few minutes a day to recognize and express appreciation to those people accomplishing the mission on a daily basis. Since most of our people are operating at the recognition/self-esteem level, they value sincere positive reinforcement from supervisors.

Not only did I stress public praise when appropriate, I also instituted several positive reinforcement policies. For example, the previous base commander indicated that he was not satisfied with the image and personal appearance of the Security Police Squadron. Part of the problem was that the previous squadron commander had departed PCS several months before and the new commander would not be on board for a few more weeks. A young lieutenant was acting squadron commander. Although he was working the big problems well, the unit was lacking senior leadership. I attended a guard mount shortly after taking command and conducted the usual open-ranks inspection; I could easily understand my predecessor's concern. Fortunately, there

was one staff sergeant in the rear rank who looked exceptionally sharp. I stepped in front of him and commented: "Sergeant Dixson, you look exceptionally sharp today. I see your shoes are in good repair and well shined, your trousers are touching the tops of your shoes without a break, your belt is properly adjusted." What I actually did was define a high standard of excellence for everyone in the flight. I concluded with, "You've made an extra effort to be a professional, so I authorize you an extra day off some time within the next 30 days; work out the details with your supervisor." When departing the area in my staff car, I noticed that the flight members were gathering around a beaming sergeant to congratulate him and to learn the new standards. At the next guard mount with another flight, no one's appearance warranted an extra day off. I called the flight chief, a technical sergeant, off to one side. "Sergeant, how do you think your troops look today?" "Oh, they look so-so." "Yes, that's right, and they all look just like you do."

The flight had a three-day break immediately following that shift. It was not until 0600 Sunday morning that I could check them again. When I stepped in front of the flight chief, he saluted proudly. "Sir, B-Flight is prepared for inspection." I could not believe my eyes! Any one of those security policemen could have been used on a recruiting poster. I had a compliment for practically everyone.

I completed my open-ranks inspection and stepped in front of the flight. "Gentlemen, this is, without a doubt, the sharpest, most professional flight of security policemen I have ever inspected. This unit not only has pride but reflects excellent supervision." I addressed the flight chief with, "Sergeant, you have a day off some time within the next 30 days; work out the details with your supervisor." As I departed the area and they were dismissed, there were much backslapping and handshaking. After the arrival of a strong lieutenant colonel commander who also advocated high standards and positive reinforcement, the squadron went on to excel in practically every measure of merit.

## **Teamwork**

I am persuaded that the average person really wants to be part of a successful team—there are very few bona fide "loners." Building team spirit in an air base group staff is challenging because many of the functions do not relate naturally in a mutually supporting way. There may be a tendency for the units to "suboptimize" performance—enhance their mission at the expense of a sister unit's mission. There are several techniques that can improve the team spirit on such a staff. First, never criticize anyone individually at staff meeting—if you are not pleased with a trend or problem in the group, fuss at the entire staff and press for ways to solve the problem together. Later, when the problem is solved, you can praise the entire group for working the problem successfully. This sets a tone of teamwork.

When one function reported a problem or concern at staff meeting, I would occasionally imply that other units

in the group would be happy to help them with the problem—another infusion of "it's not his problem, it's our problem." I also had social functions in my home, allowing functional managers and their spouses to know fellow team members socially.

When tension was noted between two areas, I resolved it; later I would man major projects such as fund drives, or committees, with members from those two units. This "force-feeding" of communications and contact always improved rapport and teamwork.

The bottom line in team building is that the commander is the personal embodiment of the unit's mission. The commander must be positive and visible to keep the mission positive and visible in the minds of everyone in the unit. The tone and tenor of my actions with my staff were to get them to focus their unit's energy and resources on the broader mission of the entire air base group. There is greater psychological reward when a larger mission is accomplished.

## **Effective Decision Making**

Very little of senior commanders' daily work involves routine decisions. If so, they have probably centralized decision making too high in the organization and need to go back and read about "train and delegate." For the sake of our discussion, let us assume the focus of decision making is properly established in your unit. What are some guideposts to assist in navigating the rough terrain of executive decision making?

First, a relationship of absolute candor between commander and advisors must exist. The commander can establish an atmosphere that either encourages or discourages open and frank communications. How one handles bad news, disagreements, and mistakes are the keys to turning people into survival-oriented self-servers or mission-oriented team players. I explained to my staff that I had a dubious talent for taking good inputs and making bad decisions, but no one can take poor inputs and make good decisions. I stressed that quality decision making was a joint venture between the commander and those doing research, developing alternatives, and offering recommendations. The quality, timeliness, and honesty of their work was borne out in the final decision of the boss. I insisted also that they distinguish between facts and opinions; a decision maker needs both, but needs them identified accordingly.

The second point to remember in decision making is to be sensitive to the appropriate decision time. I recalled that during my consulting work, a major general asked me to study his staff relationships—he sensed that his staff was rarely genuinely supportive of many of his decisions. He reported that after he had made the final decision, his staff would often ask to "discuss the matter further."

After considerable interviewing with the general and throughout his organization, the following perceptions surfaced: The general felt his role was to make decisions; he abhorred indecisiveness. He remarked proudly, "If anyone comes to me for a decision, he will have one before he leaves

my office.” The flaw in the staff relationship was poor sensitivity to when a particular decision was actually required. If it were rendered too early, then there were often critical variables that surfaced between when the decision was made and its implementation. In such cases, the staff felt free to “discuss the matter further,” and afterward a different decision was often made. Over time, the staff members were never sure when the general had made a final decision on a subject.

When I discussed this perception with the general at the outbriefing, he agreed completely with the diagnosis and set about to discuss the situation with his staff. He later reported to me that he and his staff benefited greatly from our suggestions in that area. The first thing you should resolve with your staff in any decision situation is *when* a particular decision should be made. A decision made too early is just as dysfunctional as one made too late.

The next question I ask my staff is, “What are the current limits of my authority in this matter?” I expect them to check the currency of our guidance and advise me of any trends or modifications to current policy. This “window of discretion” is important in evaluating our range of alternatives.

The final question I posed to my staff was (assuming they are oriented to the larger mission of the air base group), “What course of action do you recommend?” It is important for a staff officer to become personally identified with a decision; it tends to improve acceptance and gets him or her personally involved in the outcome.

The bottom-line understanding I had with staff was that when they provided me with current, candid inputs with a recommendation focused on the higher mission, then I would take all the “heat” if the decision generated negative repercussions. I found that, on occasion, a senior officer who was not pleased with one of my decisions would register his views with a junior member of my staff. If my decisions were to be discussed with anyone, I was the point of contact. This pledge of downward loyalty generates a reverse effect of upward loyalty to the commander and the mission of his organization.

The normal duty day of any base commander is punctuated with problem situations ranging from relatively minor misunderstandings to serious, high-impact crises. I would like to discuss briefly a few problems that served to keep my job interesting and challenging.

First, a problem, by definition, has at least one solution. If a situation has no solution, then it is not a problem but a state-of-being you must learn to live with. This quick test, “problem or state-of-being,” helps move you and your team into a “solution-oriented” mind-set because there are very few situations that cannot be solved eventually.

I found that the most misunderstood function of management was control. A great number of problems I encountered seemed to be rooted in someone’s failure to understand or apply the control function correctly. Even when managers can recite the four classic elements of control, they frequently misapply them, thereby undercontrolling or overcontrolling. Let’s clear the air on this critical aspect of effective command and review what constitutes a proper control system.

First, you must have goals or objectives stated in measurable terms, preferably quantifiable, such as dollars, rates, or percentages. Second, there must be a system to measure actual performance accurately in a timely manner; this measurement must be in the same terms as the stated goal. Third, you must be able to compare the actual performance with the desired goals. Finally, you must have action plans designed to return actual performance to desired performance. These seem bone simple, but I have witnessed an avalanche of misuses, such as only vague and general goals, measuring systems that take months to read out and then only with an “apples-to-oranges” comparison, using the comparison as a threat rather than useful management information systems and, of course, the “fire someone” mentality instead of productive corrective action. When you assume command of any unit, ensure that your people understand control and apply it correctly.

Another situation that requires your best efforts is union relationships. Most union leaders are dedicated to the unit’s mission and focus the energies of the union on getting the job done. Other officials seem to be consumed by the political high jinks of internal union activity and play the unit’s mission to serve union ends. These self-serving types are rare, but if you encounter one, he or she will give you fits. Work the union relationship business hard and bring those folks into your team.

Another facet of command that is potentially hazardous to your health is equal employment opportunity (EEO). The average Air Force supervisor is basically honest and sincere; the bona fide bigots do not last long. However, the world of EEO case law resulting from suits and appeals is complex and growing at an exponential rate. The laws are such that well-meaning people may unwittingly err and create expensive problems for you. Be sure your EEO training programs are well presented and attended by everyone concerned. The best way to prevent EEO problems is broad-based education.

Another cross that all base commanders must bear is the excessively broad span of control. The Scott AFB commander has 15 subordinates reporting directly to him. Many of these relationships are established by law. For example, the base commander must authorize searches, discharge of enlisted personnel under AFR 39-10, *Administrative Separation of Airmen*, represent the government to the union, and so on. In addition to interacting with subordinates, the base commander functions on the wing commander’s staff with seven coequal senior officers; serves on six off-base boards, panels, and councils; and performs a myriad of representational duties, both on and off base, as the “mayor” of Scott AFB.

The final problem that needs mentioning is the confusion associated with the title of “base commander.” Most civilians, and many dependent wives, think the base commander does, in fact, command the entire installation and every person on it. I assure you nothing could be further from the truth. When civilians call to complain about someone assigned to one of the tenant units, they feel the base com-

mander should be able to “order” a solution instantly. John Q. Public just cannot grasp why a base commander does not actually command the base. “If I were king,” I would change the title to support group commander. Granted, I would be facing some historical headwind with such a suggestion, but I am confident the change more closely reflects the facts and would eventually better serve both the Air Force and our supporting public.

I have offered a few tips on how to hit the ground running when you assume command, discussed the philosophical framework on which my command performance was based, and touched briefly on a smattering of problems that make up a day in the life of a base commander. I strongly encourage senior officers to enrich their service to our great nation by aggressively seeking any opportunity to state, “Sir, I assume command.”