

An Air Force Commander Reflects on Everyday Ethics
Presentation by Brigadier General Harold W. Todd (USAF)

Unfortunately, the planned taping of General Todd's talk did not work. With his permission, we have attempted to summarize the major elements of his dynamic presentation from our notes. We apologize for not being able to present the full flavor of his excellent discussion.

General Todd outlined for us a number of the specific areas which have generated ethical concerns for him in his role as a military commander. He began by providing a general analogy from the operational Air Force regarding the presentation of ethics lectures to military people. Just as we must not simply present safety lectures abstractly and expect safety awareness to take root, so we ought not to expect ethics lectures to substitute for practical ethical applications in everyday behavior.

He pointed out the risk that institutional policies may tend to generate the opposite value from the one we wish to inculcate if the policies are not properly executed or interpreted. The Strategic Air Command's Management Control System in the 1960's and the phenomenon of inflation in OER's provide examples of policy structures which have created pressures for ethically questionable accommodations. Our real challenge is to develop fair evaluation systems which do not induce or encourage unethical behavior.

Readiness reports provide another area for serious ethical concerns. The classical "look good" syndrome generates pressures for falsification. The context of readiness reporting is one of the ideal places for linking ethics with discipline.

Another set of circumstances which generates peculiar ethical behavior is triggered by the annual allocations from Congress of flying hours, manpower authorizations, maintenance funds, logistics, etc. Experience suggests that if we do not use these allocations prior to the end of the current fiscal year, we will not be able to obtain similar budgets and allocations for the next fiscal year. Consequently, a manager who has not handled his program properly throughout the year may generate activities to insure that the allocations of flying hours and/or O and M funds are exhausted, in spite of the apparent "make work" nature of these end-of-the-year activities.

One of the great challenges of command is that ethical issues are frequently ambiguous and characterized by shaded alternatives. Decisions thus are extremely difficult to make since the ethically correct decision is not always obvious. Further, a commander must always be alert to the relationship between what he says and what he does. This relationship is especially relevant to the troops. Example is the clearest teacher. Be certain that what you do is defensible (rationaly, legally, and morally) and understand that you must sometimes explain what you do. It is critical that your subordinate leaders, especially your NCO's, understand your actions and policies--they are your interpreters.

General Todd concluded with the reflection that we cannot wait for Professional Military Education (PME) programs to teach ethics to our people. The PME experience may occur too late or be too remote from everyday operations to have the necessary impact on the operational ethical climate. We must begin early and make ethical conduct a continuing learning experience through the personal and institutional example of military leaders at all levels.