

Ideas for Taking Command of a Comptroller Squadron

The following represents the personal opinions of Lt Col Jack Paulk, based on his three previous commands in the comptroller field and his time as a Leadership and Command instructor at ACSC. It is only offered as food for thought on those things that a new comptroller commander might want to consider doing in his/her first weeks and months in the job. It is not intended to be an all-inclusive checklist; rather just some useful tips accumulated over the years. I also owe a vote of thanks to Lt Col Paul Hough, who I compared notes with a few years ago, and Col Roberts Adams who was kind enough to review this material and provide some comments.

CHANGE OF COMMAND

- ♦ Get your bio written now--they will need it to put in the change of command program.
- ♦ It's your change of command, not the outgoing commander's. However, the incumbent will set up most of it for you. If you want to have a say, then get involved early.
- ♦ Find out what is expected and typical at your base for a change of command. Do it--don't be cheap. Remember that you don't get a second chance to make a first impression.
- ♦ Find out if your base provides any NAF SM&W funds to offset your expenses. They may or may not. Some bases only provide it for Group or Wing CC ceremonies. SM&W funds must be applied for *prior* to the event.
- ♦ Plan your change of command comments carefully. You don't talk for long and most people won't remember it, but what you say is vitally important nonetheless. Once again, you never get a second chance to make a first impression. You are introducing yourself to the wing and installation. Be brief, but think vision. You should follow the 7/5/3 rule...meaning the presiding official gets 7 minutes, outgoing CC gets 5 minutes and you get 3 minutes.
- ♦ If wing protocol is on the ball they will demand a dry run of the ceremony--if not, you should. Again, first impressions.
- ♦ Any overlap with the incumbent should be brief...less than half a day. Focus on any key personnel issues and any pledges previous commander has made. Respect the previous commander's judgment. Don't give a clean slate to those with disciplinary records when you arrive. Review all files for individuals with current UIFs. Your new staff can get you up to speed on drills, programs and efforts underway.
- ♦ Your predecessor wasn't perfect, but don't berate him or her (or allow others to do so). It doesn't help and certainly doesn't make you look good.
 - Often what doesn't make sense at first is very reasonable after the full context and chemistry is known.
- ♦ Think about your first staff meeting. What are your policies and vision? I would meet individually with each of your key personnel prior to the first staff meeting. It helps refine your vision of where the unit is going if you have a better idea of where they are right now.
- ♦ Unless you are inheriting a failing unit – take time (30-60 days) to observe, seek external feedback before making any major changes. Also, you should identify 2-3 major efforts you will focus on during your tenure during those first couple of months. Don't try to tackle multiple efforts – you need to retain focus.

COMMAND

- ♦ You are a commander who also happens to be a comptroller--not the other way around!
- ♦ Get your Article 31 rights card and keep it on you. You never know when you might need it.
- ♦ Command is a brotherhood. Get to know the other commanders soon and well. Make it a point to set up courtesy visits with Group and Sqd/CCs. Visit them – to get eyes on their office and work area. Seek feedback on what CPTS is doing well and what needs work.
 - Establish a peer network with the other commanders.
 - If they don't already get together regularly, suggest it (monthly luncheons work well).
 - Should be Squadron CCs only. You see the wing and group CCs in enough forums already and having them present will inhibit the discussions.
 - Do "what if" drills--what would you do in this or that situation?
 - Compare experiences--ask have you ever seen this before and how do you handle it.
 - Get a feel for what levels of discipline they apply to what infractions and why.
 - **Never** let the meetings deteriorate into boss bashing.
 - Find out common concerns and invite a guest (such as the JAG).
 - Do a once a year joint meeting with the 1st Sgts (make it a long lunch).

- Give short presentations on frequently observed problems (leave programs, government travel charge card debt, new processing procedures, etc) and encourage others to do the same.
- ♦ Don't take your command protocol responsibilities lightly. If there is a change of command, be there! If you are invited to a luncheon, make every effort to go. Wing functions should be a priority for you.
- ♦ WSA/ADCON – these duties can take a lot of your time...don't be shocked
 - You need to know how your WSA/ADCON role fits into the wing commander's sight picture. Questions to ask include
 - What role does the DS and Vice commander have WRT WSA?
 - Do you represent the WSA as a "Grp/CC" -
 - Get to know the WSA directors – build a team...divide and conquer awards, additional duties, etc
 - Focus on commander duties – team with Supt/1st Sgt
- ♦ If you have a problem with another squadron, have it worked at the lowest level practical, but if it gets to your level, call the other squadron commander--not his subordinates or superiors.
- ♦ For minor problems, people will jump through hoops for a "commander"-- don't abuse the privilege.
- ♦ Join the O'Club the day you sign in. Part of your professional responsibilities.

COMMANDER'S CALLS

- ♦ Have regular commander's calls (I did mine monthly). Commander's calls are a tremendously important communication forum and camaraderie builder. Try to keep them positive and upbeat. Use them as a forum to make sure everyone is kept informed and performance is recognized.
 - Keep it fairly formal in structure (CC should wear service dress, use an agenda, etc).
 - Reinforces the squadron identity and shows we are the equivalent of any large squadron in terms of unit pride and support for heritage and tradition. Espirit de corps is a powerful force in any size unit.
 - 1st Sgt builds the agenda for CC review and approval.
 - *Always* make sure a US Flag and the squadron guidon are there and prominently displayed.
 - Formally present anything of significance.
 - Obviously, decorations.
 - Invite the Wing/CC to present major awards, or have them presented at Wing Standup.
 - Letters of appreciation.
 - Graduation certificates.
 - Recognize your honor guard volunteers regularly.
 - Get/read copies of letters of appreciation from base honor guard--they will water your eyes.
 - Helps generate interest and encourages volunteers rather than non-volunteers (you will probably have a participation quota for your unit).
 - Recognize good inspection results from programs such as training, safety, mobility, etc.
 - Recognize high scores on CDC end-of-course exams (certificate and a pass for high scores?).
 - Recognize attainment of senior and master career field badges (training NCO can track this).
 - Invite civilians--reinforces the concept that they are full members of the team.
 - Have a photographer present--emphasizes the importance and provides a historical record.
 - When photos were returned, we would scan them, add narratives and post them to a drive on the unit LAN in a PowerPoint presentation that everyone had access to review.
 - Good way to keep a Squadron history; can periodically be put on a CD.
 - Have a spot for the first sergeant to speak each time on important matters (reinforces position).
 - Have a short spot for safety NCO each time (101 critical days, tornadoes, hurricanes, boating, etc).
 - Invite guest speakers, but limit presentations to 10-15 minutes (ask unit members for topics of interest, fulfill mandatory training requirements, expert briefings on current hot issues, etc.).
 - Build a briefing schedule for recurring requirements like family care plans, OPSEC/COMSEC security training, law of armed conflict training, etc.
 - Open the floor for questions and give them some time to respond. Make it clear through a long enough pause that you are genuinely expecting questions. If no response, ask them a question to get them talking.
 - Consider daily or weekly roll calls – maybe end of the week to share information and pass safety info. These can be at the squadron or the flight level. If weekly, suggest Friday afternoons for the squadron and Mondays for the flight/section level. Builds teamwork/family.

MISSION

- ♦ Know your boss's priorities--they ARE your priorities

- ♦ Keep the boss informed!!!! If he gets surprised, then you might too!
- ♦ Know what your MAJCOM uses for metrics and where you stand relative to other bases.
 - Develop your own metrics on relevant areas the MAJCOM doesn't track.
- ♦ Don't be afraid to explain the "why" of your decisions--if you are, you probably haven't thought it through well enough and besides, it is a part of mentoring (there are some exceptions--like disciplinary matters).
- ♦ Do a validation review of all self-inspection checklists within 6 months of arrival. Get access to MICT and IGEMS quickly.
 - Dig out the regulations and say "show me".
 - Frequently people are relying on old knowledge, the "we have always done it that way" syndrome, or misinterpretations. A fresh look at the guidance will be beneficial for all concerned.
 - A detailed review is the best way to put an abrupt end to any pencil whipping.
 - People pay attention to what the boss pays attention to.
- ♦ Who is your UDM
 - What is the status of your equipment (weapons, Logdet, laptops, masks, chemical suits, etc)?
 - What is the status of your training (weapons, self-aid buddy care, chemical, pallet building, etc)?
- ♦ AEF
 - Plan well ahead (at least 8 months).
 - Look for volunteers first; then verify abilities.
 - Select non-volunteers when it is apparent there are no qualified volunteers.
 - Develop a logical method for selecting non-volunteers and make sure personnel know how it works. When it becomes obvious someone is getting hot on the non-volunteer list, it encourages them to volunteer. It also promotes an air of fairness when the process is predictable. Get SNCO buy-in.
 - Consider things like skill level, previous deployments, medical profiles, and training.
 - Be careful about using criteria like family considerations (member responsibility), off-duty education, and other personal considerations such as vacations, etc. It can really breed discontent.
 - Remind folks if they volunteer, then they are deciding when they go rather than getting tagged at some inopportune time
 - Start an aggressive, deployment specific training program.
 - Have backups identified and trained (things *will* go wrong at the last minute).
 - Point out the positive (excellent training, direct mission support, travel, per diem, and decorations).
- ♦ Review your annexes to the base plans
 - Do you have contingency plans if an off-base accident requires cash payment of claims?
 - What is the FSO's source of funds for after-hours emergency requirements?
 - Do you know the procedures for ransom demands?
- ♦ Understand the DRRS process – accurately define status and mission impacts – it is your call
- ♦ But, also use DRRS documents to learn/understand wing shortfalls – to assist in sourcing them
- ♦

PERSONNEL

- ♦ Immediately find out everything you can about your boss, preferably by meeting with him/her. Be sure to talk with his exec. What do they expect from you and will you work more closely with the wing king or the vice or perhaps a director of staff?
- ♦ Meet with your Budget Officer, FSO, NAFFA and 1st Sgt separately to avoid group think. What are the current burning issues from each of their perspectives?
- ♦ Who is in charge when you are gone (not uncommon to have a TDY right after arrival)?
 - Important to clear the air about who speaks for the "Comptroller" (financial matters) and who speaks for the "Commander" (command and discipline) and it may not be the same person.
 - Frequently the FMA is the most qualified on comptroller issues, but is a civilian.
 - The senior officer in the unit can be put on G-series orders as temporary commander, otherwise you have to have an agreement with your wing commander that it rolls up to his level (not usually a good idea due to convening authority rules). The SJA can be a big help in this area and give you insight on the pros, cons and the preferences of the current regime.
- ♦ Meeting with the squadron personnel. You should meet with all of your folks (CPTS) one on one upon your arrival. Then – make sure to meet all new personnel one on one. You should have a ready-made briefing for these sessions – spelling out your policies and red lines.
 - Do a walk through as soon as possible!

- Set up a CC call within a month (I would do it sooner rather than later--see information on CC calls above). Provide your philosophy. See what is on their minds (you will probably have to drag it out of them in the first CC call). Determine the frequency for future commander's calls.
- Make sure you let your position on sexual harassment, equal opportunity, drug and alcohol abuse, etc. be known from the start. Let them know zero tolerance is the name of the game, period! Make sure they know to come to you if there is a situation, and when they do, deal with it promptly! Establish a means to periodically revisit these policies. Has Military Equal Opportunity (formerly social actions) previously done a workplace climate assessment (more on this later)?
- ♦ Don't abuse the chain of command going down. In other words, resist the temptation to bypass the intermediate levels of supervision and go direct to the workers to give them a specific tasking. It cuts your intermediate level supervisors out of the loop. It is OK to ask for simple things like a per diem rates or rates of basic pay.
- ♦ Review the additional duty roster and see if it makes sense. Be aware of all heavy hitting additional duties and plan to sit down with the folks who run those as soon as is practical. For example: mobility officer/NCO, Safety NCO, Training NCO, etc. When was the last inspection of these programs; how did we do? Make sure they understand the programs are important to you (good idea to review the available guidance prior to meeting so you can talk intelligently about the programs.)
 - Do a thorough review of your READY program taskings and make sure they are equitable with how the other units in the Wing are tasked.

BUSINESS

- ♦ Never lose sight of the customer! Always try to picture yourself in their shoes--what would you expect in the way of good customer service if it were you who had the problem?
- ♦ Ask for and read all Wing CC Direct Line, Hot Line, etc. complaints about your squadron in the past year. Did the complaints have any merit; did the responses treat symptoms or real causes?
- ♦ Find out your meeting schedule for the next FMB, FUB, NAF council, Wing Staff, Wing CC meeting with squadron CCs, next wing exercise, etc. Be sure to review previous minutes prior to your first meeting so you walk in as a credible participant from day one. Your secretary should have those minutes for you.
 - Review the last year of FMB minutes in-depth; knowing your history helps your future.
- ♦ Set up visit to your MAJCOM. Visit the FM and the IMSC Det. IMSC Det will be your POC for FSO related functions and BOS funding. Get to know all the key players at the MAJCOM as soon as possible. Don't circumvent working relationships between your subordinates and the MAJCOM folks, but make sure the MAJCOM analysts know that you know who they are and what role they play in support of your base.
 - What metrics does your command track; how are yours doing from the analysts' perspective?
- ♦ Are your bank and credit union agreements current?
 - Ensure the letters are done appointing you as the liaison officer.
 - Review the agreements and go meet the base branch managers.
 - Change the signs in the financial institution customer lobbies to show you as the liaison officer.
- ♦ Meet with the area audit chief. Find out the status of all open audits and the due dates for upcoming follow-up actions. This is a drudgery area but it will bite you if you aren't careful. There are hard and fast deadlines to meet before the automatic processes kick into gear for non-responsive management.
 - Be aware of PMB statements in audit findings. AF is using those now to adjust budgets
- ♦ Who is running the report of survey program? If the CPTS is - these can be difficult to administer and you need to be on top of it from the start. Have you been delegated lower level approval authority?
- ♦ Who is running your Government Travel Charge Card program? What are your statistics on delinquent accounts? What is your follow-up mechanism for tracking and improvement? Engage your fellow commanders on this – ensure they are getting reports.
- ♦ Are the quarterly cash verifications being conducted and thoroughly documented?
- ♦ Think of your facility and equipment as a program. Have a long-range plan.
- ♦ What's the status of your own squadron's budget?
- ♦ What are your additional duties? Are you on the battle staff/crisis action team, etc?
- ♦ The NAFFA works for you. SAF/FM expects you to be personally involved in a very helpful, proactive program. This is an important item of your fiduciary responsibility.

TAKE CARE OF PEOPLE

- ♦ Taking care of people doesn't necessarily mean making them happy--see that they get what they need whether they want it or not. In the long run, they will appreciate it.

- ♦ Learn their first names. Only use it in appropriate settings (e.g. don't routinely call an NCO by his first name in front of his airmen), but make sure they all know that you know their names. One-on-one meetings or during the presentation of some type of recognition is a good time.
- ♦ Discipline is one of the most difficult factors to deal with--but it must be done timely and appropriately
 - Good discipline actually builds morale by differentiating between the troublemakers (the minority of your troops) and your good people (the majority of your troops).
- ♦ Attend ALS graduation dinners and any like functions; even if you don't have someone graduating...remember to be present for wing promotion ceremonies or parties
- ♦ Do you have a booster club/unit advisory council? Who is in charge? What's the budget; what activities are planned? Read the minutes (if there are any) from the last couple of meetings.
- ♦ Remember birthdays
 - My secretary put them on my calendar and I printed my own cards on my computer at home using my color printer and putting the Squadron emblem on the front
 - I would personally present them the card on their birthday or first duty day after if not available
 - Frequently when I would bring the new card, they would have last year's still displayed on their desk!
- ♦ Visit the work areas regularly
 - Spontaneous visits are good and necessary, but I would also have a predictable visitation program to make sure I set some time aside on the calendar.
 - I made it a point to go out on Friday afternoons.
 - They knew I was coming so they would be ready to discuss what was on their minds.
 - Friday afternoon is usually a little more relaxed and they are more talkative.
- ♦ Go to the processing line during mobility.
 - Be out there in the wee hours when they are doing mobility.
 - Visit them in the field when they deploy for base exercises.
- ♦ Have forums for peer group discussions (Amn, NCO, SNCO, Civilian)
 - I did mine on a quarterly basis (it let them know I was coming so they could plan ahead and pounce on me with their peer group to address issues that concerned that group). There will be a natural inclination to take information from one group and roll it into the next group, but you must maintain a non-attribution environment if you want these sessions to continue to be productive. My schedule went like this:
 - Airmen 3rd Thursday first month in the quarter.
 - NCOs 3rd Thursday second month of the quarter.
 - SNCO's 3rd Thursday third month of the quarter.
 - Civilians as needed but not less than semiannually (clear it with the union, they may want to attend).
- ♦ Have an open door policy.
 - Let them know the open door does not circumvent the chain of command.
 - They can bring anything to you, but if it needs to go back through the chain of command you will let them know the proper channels. Let them know the chain is to be used for routine day-to-day processing issues.
 - Tell them they should always come to you with safety, discrimination, protection of resources, etc.
- ♦ Properly prepare for the arrival of new personnel.
 - First impressions are extremely important. Remember they may show up as much as a month early.
 - Have the section prepare a "clean" desk and set it up with standard office supplies.
 - Do a welcome sign or small banner and have everyone sign it (I have seen people proudly display these welcome signs for well over a year after arrival)
- ♦ Have a personal interview with every new arrival in the squadron, including civilians.
 - Explain your policies on open door, discrimination, harassment, safety, etc.
 - Discuss core values of the Air Force/unit.
 - Validate the effectiveness of you sponsor program.
 - Point out the positive features of the local environment for each member/employee (off duty education, sports, local events, hobby shops, etc).
- ♦ Visit the dining hall with the airmen. Hold your quarterly gatherings with Amn there. Annual awards will be due at the end of September. Who are the performers? Who was submitted last year but didn't win, why? Take the time to do this and support all unit level quarterly awards programs.
 - Awards are extremely important; don't blow off nomination packages because you are busy.
 - Be serious about recognizing performance by emphasizing it regularly.
 - If you don't have a nominee in each category, make your flight chiefs justify why.
 - Don't force them to nominate if there isn't a viable candidate, but don't make it easy.

- Educate your personnel on what it takes to win. Normally - job performance, community involvement, and self-improvement are all key to success.
 - Work with Command Chief Master Sergeant to get some of your people to sit on the boards.
 - Hold mock boards to prepare your troops--particularly their first time up...if they have them
- ♦ Make sure your folks get their PME; they can't get promoted without it.
- ♦ Make sure you are serious about mentoring, they will follow your example.
- ♦ Always know if you have any viable STEP promotion candidates.
 - Rough in a package on your best candidate and have it ready to tweak and submit--typically when the call comes you don't have much time and the best package usually wins.
- ♦ Unit Climate Assessment
 - Wait 6 months after taking command and then ask the Equal Opportunity office for a climate assessment this in addition to the one that might be accomplished during the summer.
 - Compare your results to the previous assessment (assuming it is still on file or available).
 - Brief the squadron on the results at Commander's call and give them your vision for the future.
 - If you don't brief it, they may just see it as another useless survey that won't make a difference.
- ♦ Have a suggestion box for squadron members in addition to the one for Comptroller customers.
 - Anonymous suggestions can be an extremely valuable tool for zeroing in on issues that no one is willing to talk to you about face-to-face.
- ♦ Consider getting a squadron coin (private funds of course). Difficult to organize but pays tremendous dividends in unit pride. We found there was more demand than we initially thought. People gave them as gifts, people from other units bought them and newcomers wanted them.
- ♦ Make sure you take care of your civilian work force – tie awards to actual awards – like time off awards for winning squadron, WSA and wing. New civilian appraisal system supports these efforts.

TRAINING

- ♦ Your training NCO is an absolutely "ESSENTIAL" part of your management team. Pick a good one!
 - Get training on how to properly maintain OJT records and personally do periodic spot-checks (people pay attention to what the boss pays attention to).
 - Announce the spot checks in advance so they can prepare--don't make it a "got you" exercise. The goal is good records; not to "catch" them. Also, provides an opportunity for kudos.
 - **KNOW** the review process your unit uses to ensure your troops in upgrade training are ready to test; *don't wait for a failure to find out you have an ineffective system.*
 - With upgrade testing, it is two strikes (failures) and you are out (of the service that is).
- ♦ Remember that using training modules from the SAF home page is mandatory.
 - Make them prove they are using them through documentation.

QUALITY ASSURANCE (QA)

- ♦ Do you already have a good strategic plan/unit goals, etc?
- ♦ Review your last IG inspection report.
- ♦ Review the current IG crossfeeds and your QA responses.
- ♦ Review the QA reviews (QAR) for the last six months and ask to see the QAR forecast.
- ♦ What is the current customer service feedback rating level?
- ♦ What is the schedule for your QA review meetings? Monthly? Quarterly?
- ♦ What is the current self-inspection validation process? Cross SMA? QA only?
- ♦ You need access to MICT and IGEMS – learn how these work and ensure your folks are using...be engaged.

KEY RELATIONSHIPS

- ♦ Get to know immediately
 - All of the other commanders.
 - Contracting officer.
 - WSA Directors (see ADCON WSA) – especially JAG for your CC duties
 - Civilian personnel officer.
 - Manpower Chief
 - Civil engineer.
 - Respective secretaries and execs for key personnel.

- Don't underestimate the importance of a good relationship with the secretaries and execs--they can cook your goose with the boss.

COMMANDER'S SUPPORT STAFF (CSS)

- ♦ Since your support staff position is usually one deep, you have to lobby for a quality person.
- ♦ Really use your checklists here!!! Get personally involved in your self inspections!!!
- ♦ .
- ♦ Review all PIFs.
- ♦ Review all family care plans personally the first time. The 1st Sgt should run this program for you.
 - Pay particular attention to the sign-in roster on your first exercise to see if there are problems.
- ♦ Mandatory random weigh-ins are gone, but you are still responsible. How do you control it?
- ♦ What is your unit track record on EPR/OPR timeliness?
- ♦ How are promotion testing notifications made? Does the CSS follow-up to prevent no-shows?
- ♦ Does your wing have a quality of force meeting--how often and when?
- ♦ Does your wing have a "We Care" program, 1st Sgt should brief you?
- ♦ Is your recall roster "always" up-to-date; do you have a copy in your pocket right now?!
- ♦ Additional duty first sergeant is a "First Sergeant"! But you might have a full time First Sgt due to WSA ADCON
 - Make the time for the normal 1st Sgt duties.
 - He/she needs to go to the Wing 1st Sgt meetings.
 - Make it obvious he is the commander's right hand.
 - How often does your 1st Sgt do dorm inspections? You should periodically participate with 1st Sgt in dorm inspections, etc. Helps you to know how the troops live.
 - Who fills in when the 1st Sgt is on leave, TDY, etc? Just in case you get a call at midnight.
 - Is the additional duty 1st Sgt partnered with a diamond wearing 1st Sgt for mutual support?
- ♦ Review your Unit Control Center (UCC) procedures.
 - Do you have recall sign-in procedures?
 - Are your UCC checklists current?
 - Who runs your UCC?
 - Do you have contingency ESP codes set up with the OPLOC in case you need one on the weekend or at night?
 - Don't wait for the first exercise to discover you are not ready.

HAVE SOME FUN

- ♦ Support a unit advisory council or social committee, but let the young troops run it.
- ♦ Make sure there is some time set aside for picnics, Christmas parties, etc.
- ♦ Encourage unit sports days--participate, but don't dominate.
- ♦ Support intramural sports.
 - If your squadron can't field a team, partner with another small squadron.
- ♦ Enter friendly competitions with other squadrons.