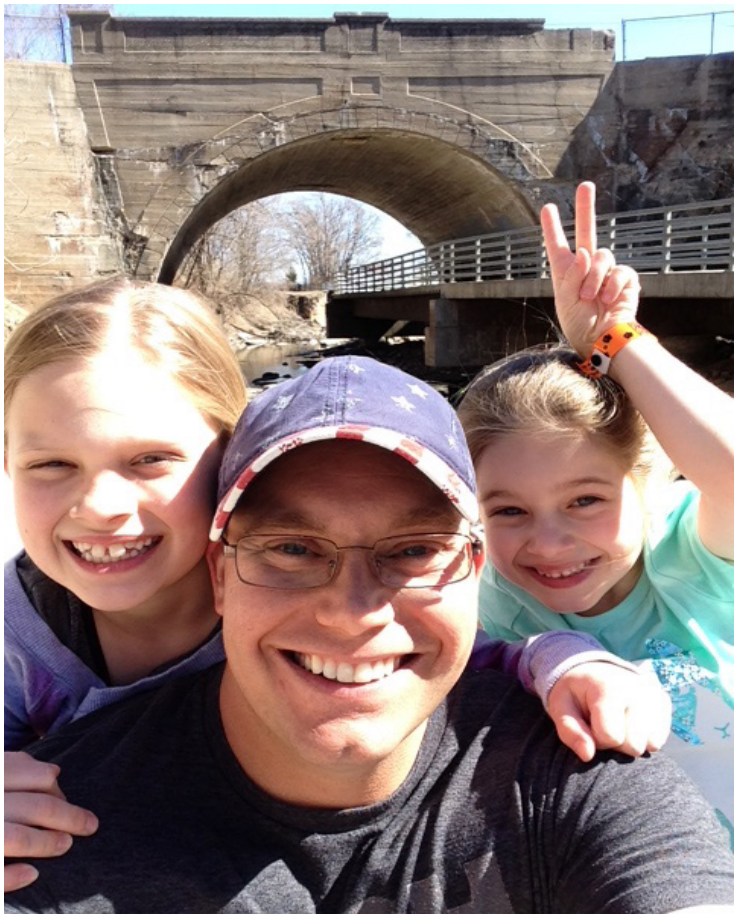
Bonding and Balance at CGSC 2015/16

By Maj. Christopher J. Masson, U.S. Army

SG2D during Tactics

Lieutenant Colonel (LTC) Jimmy Peay often told our 82ND Airborne (ABN) Division Artillery (DIVARTY) staff that "relationships matter."[1] Jim was the deputy commanding officer (DCO) for 82ND DIVARTY when I served as the S4/logistics officer. At the time, we were majors together. We bonded as friends while working to chart DIVARTY's road to full operational capability (FOC) after this historic unit was reactivated in October of 2014.[2] Jim reminded me to build relationships at Fort Leavenworth when I was preparing to depart for the Army's Command and General Staff Officer's Course (CGSOC) at the Command and General Staff College (CGSC). I absolutely made the most of his guidance. Not only did I get to know many fantastic officers from every service component and from some foreign nations while attending class, but I made memories outside of the daily coursework grind. Many fulfilling lifelong relationships were forged over camp fires, a few good beers, great cigars, and the intimacy that comes from professionals discussing their lives in these types of settings. My CGSC experience was superb because I was able to accomplish two main goals – building relationships with quality officers and balancing my time across the spectrums of schoolwork, family, church activities, and personal fitness.


Kaitlynn, Chris, and Kara in the town of Leavenworth, KS

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The Best Year of Our Lives

Many officers that attend CGSC grow tired of hearing the phrase that "this is the best year of your life." However, I would argue that there are certain aspects of coming to CGSC as a field grade officer that certainly put it in the running as one of the best years in the Army. For one, we aren't responsible for subordinates, and we don't sign for large amounts of equipment like in our operational units; we are here to take care of ourselves and study in an academic setting. Second, the beauty of the installation and the peacefulness of the surrounding communities make this an ideal place to live and work. The opportunities to study our profession and grow as organizational leaders make this place special. I think that academics at any institution of higher learning feel the same way – great effects can result wherever professionals are gathering to learn and embrace rigorous mental challenges.

A Year of Balance

Rather than thinking of this year as the best in our Army career, Ty Bruner, our Deputy to the Commander for the U.S. Student Detachment, explained that it's better to think of this experience as a year of "balance."[3] Ty listed examples that included balancing time with family, friends, and schoolwork. He indicated that this was an opportunity to accomplish some personal goals as well. For example, I definitely wanted to maintain my physical, spiritual, and emotional fitness so I worked hard every day to coordinate these aims around family and schoolwork obligations.

The Army invests considerably in its resident students so we owe it to the Army Profession to work hard in our studies. Army Doctrine Reference Publication (ADRP) 1, defines the Army Profession [as] "a unique vocation of experts certified in the ethical design, generation, support, and application of landpower, serving under civilian authority and entrusted to defend the Constitution and the rights and interests of the American people."[4] Society viewing the Army as a profession adds to its credibility; experts that are responsibly defending the nation receive more autonomy to man, train, equip, and ultimately maneuver the force in combat.[5] Therefore, as officers in this academic environment, we owe the American people our best efforts at growing as professionals to effectively and intelligently lead our Army as organizational leaders.

I wanted to approach this challenge of developing professionally by deliberately balancing my requirements so that once the year was over, I didn't regret not spending time with my family and not maintaining my spiritual, emotional, and physical fitness. I witnessed several officers that did not balance their time here and will most likely look back on this year with regrets – regrets that they wasted opportunities to reconnect with family, bond with new friends, and explore Kansas, Missouri, Nebraska, and other states in the Midwest. As professionals, it is incumbent upon us to recognize that we give our best effort over the long haul if we balance.

Balance Through Deliberate Planning

Balancing my CGSC experience meant prioritizing and creating a routine that would work. Foresight and planning are critical to achieving balance. My wife and I's first priority was making sure our daughters attended and had support for their activities. Once a week, I spent around three hours in the evening writing papers and working virtually nonstop on academic requirements; when the weather was warm, I did this in the garage with the door open to enjoy the outdoors. When it was colder, I drove 15 minutes to the town of Weston, Missouri, and worked at the Weston Tobacco Company. Weston Tobacco had free wireless internet, and I normally took a thermos of coffee and bought a couple cigars that would last me three hours. The remaining evenings I worked hard for around two hours in the living room or my basement office after getting the kids ready for bed. Brandi was the kids' homework supervisor, and I read to them before bed, helped them with prayers, and tucked them in. On Sunday, we all attended Haven Baptist Church and normally went out to eat for lunch.

This routine worked well for our family and really helped us balance the year. When we were stationed at Fort Bragg, North Carolina prior to CGSC, I almost always left for work at 5:30 am and arrived home at night well after 7 pm -- it was a deliberate decision to take back some of that time for my family here at CGSC, knowing that

after this year was over, 12+ hour days would again become the norm. Planning my CGSC routine was further nested with how I wanted my career to unfold. Brandi and I love the Army and we always plan in several year increments; our goals and aspirations are nested because we talk through career options and look at what we want out of life, as a family. Early in the fall of 2015 we decided that a target for us was to relocate to the National Capital Region (NCR) after CGSC. This was a big part in my pursuit of an interagency fellowship. It's hard for me to determine if this year at Fort Leavenworth was the best I've had so far in the Army but, it's certainly near the top of the list, thanks to the effort I put into creating balance between study and my other priorities.

Building Relationships During Daily Classes

For those that have never attended resident CGSC, a brief explanation of the school environment is essential. Each academic year is similar. Our 2015/16 academic class totaled a little over 1,300 officers. These officers were primarily from the Army force – both active and U.S. Army Reserve. Further, there were very talented officers selected to attend from the Air Force, Navy, Marines, and Coast Guard. Finally, we had a large and diverse group of international officers from nations that we partner with all around the world including Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan, Germany, Togo, and the United Kingdom, just to name a few. Each academic year, this large group of officers is subdivided into sections and then further subdivided into staff groups. Each staff group consists of around 15 to 16 officers and is comprised of all the above categories – Army, international, and some members of the other services. Around ¾ of the academic year, officers work within the group construct. My staff group was "Two Delta" (abbreviated as SG2D). My closest friends throughout the year were from SG2D since we spent, on average, six hours a day together in a classroom setting.

Bonding as a staff group is paramount to an enjoyable year at CGSC. I was extremely fortunate because our group of 15 officers really enjoyed each other's company and we looked forward to seeing each other in class and outside of class. However, a big part of a staff group's dynamic is driven by the quality, professionalism, and personalities of the group's primary instructors (referred to as facilitators). SG2D was blessed with two of the finest facilitators at the schoolhouse – Clay McDaniel and Greg Cook. Mr. McDaniel and Mr. Cook were true experts in the subject matter that they facilitated, but more importantly, they cared about each of us personally and managed our daily classes with humor, empathy, and professionalism. We bonded during class through stories (most of which were true), jokes, serious academic discussions, current events, and a deliberate attention to understanding Army and joint doctrine.

Building Relationships Outside of Class

Our relationships were so strong that they often carried us to after-class bonding at staff group events, gym sessions, and dinners or drinks at local restaurants where we often dialogued about the Army Profession, desires for future assignments, and goals after retirement. There is absolutely something about an academic setting that allows for deep thought, contemplation, and reassessment of professional aims. Even though this discernment can occur in the classroom, it's often just as thoughtful, if not more so, in a more relaxed environment. Really making the most of a CGSC resident experience involves building strong relationships outside of the classroom; accomplishing this after-class bonding and professional growth was easy for me because I lived on Fort Leavenworth and several members from SG2D also lived on post. Further, many other SG2D officers lived within ten minutes from post. This afforded us more opportunities to bond and grow outside of class.

My favorite evenings from summer and fall of 2015 and the spring of 2016 were fire pit gatherings. Congregating around a small camp fire for cigars and beer was a nice way to wrap up an afternoon. I've often been a big believer that great cigars with great friends make everything better. I still look back on each of my overseas deployments and smile as I think of the amazing people I bonded with over a cigar. At CGSC, enjoying a cigar and a beer was the catalyst to military, religious, family, and political dialogue; our genius unfolded as we worked to solve problems locally to internationally – we espoused wisdom and humor but, more importantly, we enjoyed each other's company. I will warmly remember fire pit gatherings for years to come.

Conclusion

If I could give any advice to future CGSC resident students it would be the same advice I received from Jim Peay and Ty Bruner – relationships matter and balance the year. My hope is that future students harness the opportunities to absorb the important curriculum and grow as professionals at this amazing institution of higher learning. I would further advise that future students build long lasting relationships with other officers during class and outside of the classroom setting. These relationships start with personal conversations and a desire to learn through others' experiences. Ultimately, my hope is that students relocating to Fort Leavenworth for CGSC balance the year to grow physically, emotionally, spiritually, and relationally with their families – the year will pass quickly, and officers don't want to look back on wasted opportunities where they continually chose academia over family, friends, and personal well-being.

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Special Note: This paper was edited by Colonel (Retired) Neal H. Bralley, Supervisory Assistant Professor, Directorate of Logistics and Resource Management, and Team Leader, Team 13, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College.

NOTES:

1. Jimmy Peay's full name and rank: Lieutenant Colonel James H.B. Peay IV.

2. 82ND ABN DIVARTY was activated (reactivated) by a U.S. Army Forces Command (FORSCOM) Order pub. 9 April 2014.

3. Mr. Terrell (Ty) Bruner is the Deputy to the Commander for US Student Services Detachment. He often addresses the new classes each summer, and his staff is responsible for all administrative paperwork including passes, leaves, and travel.

4. Army Doctrine Reference Publication (ADRP) 1, *The Army Profession* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Officer [GPO], 14 June 2015), supersedes ADRP 1, 14 June 2013. This ADRP is part of an ongoing Army effort to define and develop the Army, as a profession. It further defines the Army Ethic and the Army Professional.

5. This extract is from a paper by Major Christopher J. Masson titled "Why I Returned: Re-entering Service in the Army Profession", April 2016, currently with review for web publication by U.S. Army Center for the Army Profession and Ethic (CAPE).