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AFJAGS Podcast: Episode 2

10 Leadership Legacy Lessons with Colonel Cynthia Kearley - Part 1

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As part of an oral history project, 10 leadership legacy lessons learned from Brigadier General Chester Taylor, Jr.

Maj Rick Hanrahan:

Welcome to another episode from the Air Force Judge Advocate General's School. I'm your host Major Rick Hanrahan. This episode is part one from a two part interview with Colonel Cynthia Kearley on 10 leadership legacy lessons. Here are a few clips from part one of the interview.

Col Cynthia Kearley:

Valuing the humble job, doing that well will lead to another opportunity. The role that all these little jobs played in a bigger picture, I think that that's what probably led to making him such an incredible leader and a professional that he was.

10 Leadership Legacy Lessons

1. **Be proactive.**
2. **Value the humble job.**
3. **Appearance matters.**
4. **Practice ambassadorship.**
5. **Be relatable in the sense that relationships matter.**
6. **Show interest in your subordinates.**
7. **Confidence is gained through meeting challenges.**
8. **Take the ball and run with it.**
9. **Have compassion and gratitude.**
10. **The overarching lesson of leave a legacy.**

Announcer:

Welcome to the Air Force Judge Advocate General's Reporter Podcast where we interview leaders, innovators, and influencers on the law, leadership and best practices of the day. And now to your host from the Air Force Judge Advocate General's School.

Maj Rick Hanrahan:

Welcome to another episode from the Air Force Judge Advocate General's School at Maxwell Air Force Base. I'm your host, Major Rick Hanrahan. Remember, if you like the show, please subscribe on [iTunes](#) and leave a review. This helps us to grow an outreach to the JAG Corps and beyond. We are excited to have in studio today our very own Deputy Commandant of the JAG school, Colonel Cynthia Kearley to speak on today's topic, 10 leadership legacy lessons. Ma'am, it's a pleasure to have you in studio today.

Col Cynthia Kearley:

Thank you, Major Hanrahan. I am just thrilled to be here and it's a beautiful morning out in Montgomery, Alabama today and I look forward to our discussion.

Maj Rick Hanrahan:

Colonel Kearley pinned onto the rank of Colonel this past August and has had quite a distinguished career. She commissioned in late 2001 and has held 14 assignments including positions at the base legal office, area defense counsel, law clerk for the Air Force Court of Criminal Appeals, a deputy staff judge advocate, chief of civil law and instructor here at the JAG School where I might add, I was one of her students, assistant executive and then chief of communications and media relations to the judge advocate general, a staff judge advocate at Moody Air Force Base, a student at Air War College and now back to the JAG school as the Deputy Commandant.

During this time, Colonel Kearley also deployed twice in support of Operation IRAQI FREEDOM and ENDURING FREEDOM. Alongside the Commandant Colonel Chris Brown they lead a team of over 60 faculty and staff, where in 2018 the JAG school reached over 25,000 stu-

dents. Including 71 in residence courses, seven distance learning courses, and over 100 teaching events outside of the school.

Today's topic is entitled 10 leadership legacy lessons. The legacy aspect of this topic was spawned by a very interesting JAG oral history that Colonel Kearley had the unique opportunity to get involved concerning the late [Brigadier General Chester Taylor](#). Ma'am, could you perhaps provide a little background on how you became involved with Brigadier General Taylor and how these leadership legacy lessons came about?

Col Cynthia Kearley:

Sure. It was quite a series of chance encounters that led to the opportunity to interview one of our JAG Corps giants that really shaped the corps that we had today. So I was at a dinner event in Washington D.C. at the time and it was an event to honor Colonel Tonya Hagmaier, one of our more senior leaders who had received an award and I was just there as an attendee and sitting next to me was Colonel Marlisa Scott, who's a judge advocate today as well. And Colonel Scott was telling me about this project she was working on, she was going to interview Brigadier General Chester Taylor, who was 85 years old at the time and she was getting ready to go out to meet with him for the first time in a couple weeks. She just invited me to join her and I said yes and thought it sounded like an interesting opportunity. I'm just so grateful that she thought to extend that invitation to me.

So a couple weeks later we went out to meet General Taylor. Now General Taylor lived in Luray, Virginia at his beautiful farmhouse, really a farm property. It's a historic property, but he invited us over to get to know him and we brought our families and just enjoyed a wonderful day together. During that time we had opportunities to discuss his career and then the next day we went on the record and recorded an interview with him and learned about a lot of JAG Corps history. Of course how he approached challenges, both legal challenges and leadership challenges in his career and it was just fascinating.

It was an opportunity I wish every JAG could have that chance, but I was grateful for it. We did spend about over a six month period, three different times where we sat down and interviewed General Taylor and then we actually have a process in the JAG Corps where we save those recordings as part of an oral history project and so that's what we were doing. I've had an opportunity this past year to relate some of those lessons to the rest of the JAG Corps. We had a really neat heritage event here back in June at the Air Force Judge Advocate General's School and then I had a chance to relate what I call these 10 legacy leadership lessons that I pulled out from my series of interviews with General Taylor.

Maj Rick Hanrahan:

So, ma'am, how did you come to the determination of these particular 10 leadership legacy lessons?

Col Cynthia Kearley:

Well, I had listened to his recording several times and I, of course, participated in them and I thought there's got to be a way that we can share aspects of his career with a larger audience and the idea of 10 lessons really jumped out at me. I talked about it with family members over dinner and just thought there's got to be a neat way to do this. So when I sat down in some quiet time of reflection and just that, what are the 10 lessons? And this is what I came up with. So I think we'll discuss them here, but that was the thought process.

Maj Rick Hanrahan:

And ma'am, would you be able for our listeners, just to mention off what those 10 leadership legacy lessons are, and then we can take those one by one in turn.

Col Cynthia Kearley:

Sure. And before I do that, we call them legacy lessons because General Taylor retired his active duty Air Force career in 1981. So our service is really distanced by several generations of judge advocates, but his lessons are timeless and so that's why we use the term legacy with them. Those 10 lessons, and I think anyone will agree that these are timeless lessons, include, one, be

proactive. Two, value the humble job. Three, appearance matters. Four, practice ambassadorship. Five, be relatable in the sense that relationships matter. Six, show interest in your subordinates. Seven, confidence is gained through meeting challenges. Eight, take the ball and run with it. Nine, have compassion and gratitude. And 10 was the overarching lesson of leave a legacy.

Maj Rick Hanrahan:

Those are some great lessons, ma'am. I'd like to kind of walk through those one at a time if that's okay.

Col Cynthia Kearley:

Sure. Let's do it.

Maj Rick Hanrahan:

So moving on to the first leadership legacy lesson. **Number one, be proactive.** What exactly does this mean? And perhaps could you provide an example of perhaps being proactive versus maybe being reactive or being passive in maybe a typical base legal office situation?

Col Cynthia Kearley:

Sure. I think being proactive is hearing about a problem or seeing an opportunity and then doing something about it and not waiting for the perfect moment or until you have enough free time to dedicate to it. Just kind of really digging in and doing something about it and General Taylor did this as a result of attending a conference with The Judge Advocate General, where The Judge Advocate General at the time asked that all the attendees of the conference, which were senior lawyers and paralegals, that they think about the POW/MIA families. So this was in the timeframe where we had a large amount of POW/MIA families in Los Angeles and in Virginia during the Vietnam War and General Taylor, upon reflection on the flight back, he's literally in the airplane thinking about the charge he had just received from The Judge Advocate General, the most senior attorney in the Air Force, and he decided he was going to have a meeting with his team and they were going to proactively find ways to help these families.

It ultimately led to him attending a meeting that the POW/MIA spouses were having, listening to their problems and then he worked with a team of attorneys to change the law essentially. They partnered with the American Bar Association, and the California State Bar Association and Governor Reagan's office at the time, and they got a law passed, The POW/MIA Relief Act of 1972. That gave great, tremendous relief to POW/MIA spouses, both financially as well as allowing them greater ease to deal with some of their property issues that they were dealing with, with a spouse not being available to sign on sale of homes and sales of cars. But here's the proactive thing. He didn't just go after get into the root of the problem by learning about the problem and then working with people who could actually fix the problem through the law. Then he proactively published a guide to all California attorneys, both private sector as well as in the Air Force and the other military branches to help attorneys apply this new legislation to benefit POW/MIA families.

Maj Rick Hanrahan:

Fascinating stuff, ma'am. Could you perhaps maybe provide an example from your perspective as both maybe a deputy staff judge advocate, and as a staff judge advocate and even here at the school where you've seen company grade officers, or field grade officers, or even our paralegal community doing things that you would quote say is proactive in a very positive sense?

Col Cynthia Kearley:

Sure. I think of a situation where a group proactively engaged with a county child support office to actually bring them onto the base to hold workshops on how to deal with child support issues that transcended different state borders. In the military we may have families with those concerns and instead of just referring the client out to seek help and with some other outside agency, they actually proactively met with the agency and brought them on the base once a month so that they could kind of partner with the legal office in getting some support out to the people who needed it. That was an initiative. It's sort of showing initiative.

We've also had people do this on the leadership side. I had a receptionist in a base legal office who realized we were turning away a lot of our retirees that wanted to come in for wills because we were busy getting some of the active duty members seen and we had to commit at that time to seeing them first. So instead of just presenting it as an issue and just letting it go, she proposed a wonderful solution where we had a full Saturday that was dedicated to serving our retirees and we made it a fun day with balloons and cake and the adult children that brought their parents really appreciated it because they didn't have to take time off work to bring them in because they weren't traditionally working on a Saturday. So that was a proactive approach.

I've also seen it here at the school. I mean things like this, having a podcast where we know that people want to use their time well. Whether it's working out or driving on a commute and so they want to listen to what's going on around the JAG Corps, but also just around, gain some leadership perspectives in general. So I think that this is a proactive initiative. We've had some incredible ideas that come forward and when people are willing to just take that additional step and implement them, the world can change. I mean everything. That's why people join the Air Force. They want to innovate, they want to do neat things and we can give them those opportunities if we allow them and encourage that proactive nature that General Taylor so well embraced.

Maj Rick Hanrahan:

Great stuff there ma'am. Moving on to **lesson number two, value the humble job**. I presume that this refers to the day to day or apparently "mundane duties" of any job. Could you speak in a little more detail on this lesson?

Col Cynthia Kearley:

Sure. I think any professional can look at a set of tasks and some of them are not as exciting as some others, but they all kind of have to get done. But valuing the humble job, doing that well will lead to another opportunity and then also just realizing the significance of any job that might be considered humble but will really help people.

So for example, General Taylor talked about in his day legal assistance where you're actually providing kind of a free legal advice to service members and their families, was kind of at the bottom of the list of important things to do as an Air Force lawyer. He said he never felt that way personally, and I think it was that value that he placed on what maybe others considered a humble job, like taking a break during their day of reviewing multimillion dollar contracts, and preparing court cases and stopping and helping an airman with a lease or drafting a power of attorney for somebody.

The fact that he valued those moments led to his insight, which led to such a tremendous program and of course the legislation with the POW/MIA Relief Act of 1972 because he valued legal assistance. He valued what some at the time thought was a more humble job. That started with his childhood. I got to learn about him working on a farm as a toddler. He had these jobs where he had to go out and bring jugs of heavy water out to the field to his dad and to others that were working on the field. He also had to collect eggs out of the hen pens, I guess that's what they're called, but apparently the little chickens would peck at his arm and he remembers this and he was only about two or three at the time. The fact that he was taught to kind of value the role that all these little jobs played in a bigger picture, I think that that's what probably led to making him such an incredible leader and a professional that he was.

Maj Rick Hanrahan:

Thank you ma'am. Moving on to **lesson number three, appearance matters**. So when I think of this, I think we may be thinking of your dress both on and off duty, which we often don't talk about the off duty. But also in respect to work performance, how your appearance matters to those within the JAG Corps and those outside of the JAG Corps. Could you elaborate on this lesson?

Col Cynthia Kearley:

Sure. I think we always hear things like, "You never get a second chance to make a first impression," and there's a

lot of value in that, but appearance matters. I think, like what you said Major Hanrahan hits it right on the spot that there's appearance physically and then there's an appearance professionally. So when it comes to, let's start with the easier maybe of the two, the physical appearance, General Taylor in his oral history talks about how even during a time where he didn't have to wear his uniform to try these contract cases, there was an option where at the time judge advocates didn't have to wear their service dress uniform in court for those particular cases. But he always did and then he tells this great story about the history of the JAG badge and he was one of the first to get the JAG badge in his entire command and he was so proud of that and he wore it on his uniform all the time.

He would go up against some real heavy hitting attorneys that were at these big law firms in Washington, D.C. Representing different contractors for the different manufacturers and airline industry partners, and he would wear that JAG badge with such pride. Then when he was a student getting his MBA that the Air Force sent him to get his MBA, he wore a shirt and tie and that was kind of, he said his civilian uniform and he thought that because they were representing the Air Force they should always look a little better than the other students. They should always present themselves to the best that they could and he kind of led by example. The other Air Force members in the group, judge advocates, they started to adopt that same uniform of the days.

But that was an appearance matters lesson, but it translates to everything we do when it comes to our personal appearance. When we're traveling, you may have an opportunity to meet somebody on an airplane and they always ask, "What do you do?" And it's nice if you say you're a judge advocate in the United States Air Force and you're dressed well. You have to consciously make these choices. I think travel, people want to be comfortable so there's temptation to wear sweat pants and just relax. But I think we're always representing something and we're representing ourselves, but especially those

of us that are serving in uniform, we're representing the Air Force, we're representing the country, the United States of America and it's important.

The same goes for our work product too. Just having a high standard in what we produce, and our written products, and our speech when we talk with other people. Just trying at times to keep that as excellent as possible is important and so that's really the gist of the lesson on appearance mattering.

Maj Rick Hanrahan:

So moving on to **lesson number four, practice ambassadorship**. I think when most hear ambassadorship they likely think about maybe international relations. Is that what General Taylor is talking about here or is it broader than that?

Col Cynthia Kearley:

I think it's broader than just international relations. Although being a representative of your country, especially if you are in a foreign country, is so important to think of ourselves as ambassadors and all that entails in the sense of realizing that they are not just looking at you as Rick Hanrahan or Cynthia Kearley, but they're looking at us as representatives of the United States. So they'll think all Americans interact in this particular way and so I think General Taylor, I don't think he had to actually practice ambassadorship. I just think it was part of his nature because he followed principles like the golden rule where you treat others as you would like to be treated.

But the lesson there is just this incredible story that went into where he dealt with a claim resulting from an air crash mishap that took place in the Philippines and a village was severely hurt by the crash in terms of losing some economic drivers, and some of their livestock, as well as their farm. Some of the villagers were killed and he and his sergeant, Sergeant Bill Creader, they spent over six months working with the villagers every day to kind of make it better on behalf of America.

We have a process, the claims process, where they worked through all of that, but each day he treated people well and he treated them so well that they actually were asked to become co-God parents of one family's baby daughter. Yeah, I mean that's ambassadorship. Here you take somebody who's representing the country that caused some level of pain and suffering and you don't just forgive them or procedurally deal with them, but you actually turn around and honor them and welcome them in one of the deepest ways that the people there could. That's incredible and so I can't imagine all the little interactions over six months that it took to lead to that kind of moment. But that's ambassadorship and it can be done overseas or just amongst our colleagues, our partners, in our national security arena, our neighbors, our families.

Maj Rick Hanrahan:

Ma'am, I completely concur with you. General Taylor's example of ambassadorship is an exemplar for all of us in the corps and even beyond the corps on what it means to be an ambassador, which goes beyond, like you said, ma'am, more than just the international components. Just it's a part of who he was. Amazing takeaway there. Moving on to **lesson number five, be relatable**. In other words, relationships matter. Ma'am, how does one go about being "relatable" and what does that mean?

Col Cynthia Kearley:

Well, I think of this experience of interviewing General Taylor. So here he's 85 years old. He's from a prior time in the JAG Corps, but he related to me and to my family in the sense that he brought us over to his house so that we could get to know him and his daughter, Mary Ellen. They gave us the honor of cooking us meals that were just wonderful. We broke bread together. We had a great day at his farm. We fished in the pond, our kids did, and he actually stocked the pond with fish so that they could actually be guaranteed a catch, but that was relatability. We could have done it in a more stuffy setting and just met at an office building somewhere and conducted an interview.

But he made sure that we had a chance to get to know him and who he was, and he also wanted to know us. That's why he invited our families over. My husband got to know him. Later on he came out to my promotion at the Pentagon. I mean, it really ended up being a relationship, a wonderful one. But that's, I think being relatable is just looking out for the people that you're interacting with. If you have an opportunity to make an interaction more meaningful, do so. I mean he was funny. It was clear that he was well-regarded but not stuffy. I mean here I'm a major at the time. I've got little kids that are going to run around and probably make a mess of things and he warmly welcomed us in his house. There was nothing that could be done that would have taken away that level of hospitality that he showed us.

Maj Rick Hanrahan:

That wraps up part one of our interview with Colonel Kearley on 10 leadership legacy lessons. Make sure to check out the next episode for the continuation of this interview in part two where we discuss lessons six through 10. And remember if you liked the show, let us know on [iTunes](#) by leaving a review. That's all for today. See you on the next episode.

Announcer:

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