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THE AIR FORCE CORE VALUES

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Core Values help those who join us to understand right from the outset what's expected of them. Equally important, they provide all of us, from [the rank of] Airman to four-star general, with a touchstone—a guide in our own conscience—to remind us of what we expect from ourselves. We have wonderful people in the Air Force. But we aren't perfect. Frequent reflection on the core values helps each of us refocus on the person we want to be and the example we want to set.

—General Michael E. Ryan, Chief of Staff, United States Air Force (CSAF), 1997-2001

The core values are a statement of those institutional values and principles of conduct that provide the moral framework for military activities. The professional Air Force ethic consists of three fundamental and enduring values of integrity first, service before self, and excellence in all we do.¹ This ethic is the set of values that guides the way Airmen live and perform. Success hinges on the incorporation of these values into the character of every Airman. In today's time-compressed, dynamic, and dangerous operational environment, an Airman does not have the luxury of examining each issue at leisure. He or she must fully internalize these values in order to be better prepared in all situations—to maintain integrity, to serve others before self, to perform with excellence and to encourage others to do the same. The Air Force core values—**integrity first, service before self, and excellence in all we do**—are a commitment each Airman makes when joining the Air Force. These values provide a foundation for leadership, decision-making, and success, no matter the level of an Airman's assignment, the difficulty of the task at hand, or the dangers presented by the mission.

There are four reasons the Service recognizes the Air Force core values as fundamental to its people:²

¹ The Air Force core values were originally released in the 1997 *Air Force Core Values Handbook* (the "little blue book"). Text follows the basic structure of this handbook. AFI 1-1, *Air Force Standards*, updates the "little blue book" to encapsulate this information.

² Adapted from the *Air Force Core Values Handbook* (1997), Chapter II.

- ✦ **The core values identify the attributes all Airmen should live.** All Air Force personnel must possess integrity first. At the same time, a person's "self" must take a back seat to Air Force service: rules must be acknowledged and followed faithfully; other personnel must be respected as persons of fundamental worth; discipline and self-control must be demonstrated always; and there must be faith in the system. The Air Force demands each of us places service before self. It is imperative we seek excellence in all we do—whether the form is product/service excellence, resources excellence, community excellence, or operations excellence.
- ✦ **They point to what is universal and unchanging in the profession of arms.** The values are road signs inviting us to consider key features of the requirements of professional service, but they cannot hope to point to or pick out everything. By examining integrity, service, and excellence, we also eventually discover the importance of duty, honor, country, dedication, fidelity, competence, and a host of other professional requirements and attributes.
- ✦ **They help us get a fix on the ethical climate of an organization.** Big ticket scandals grow out of a climate of ethical erosion. Because some believe our operating procedures or the requirements levied upon them from above are absurd, they tend to "cut corners" or "skate by." As time goes by, these actions become easier and they become habitual until the person can no longer distinguish between the "important" taskings or rules and the "stupid" ones. Lying on official forms becomes second nature. Placing personal interests ahead of the mission becomes a natural response. And they develop a "good enough for government work" mentality. In such a climate of corrosion the core values can bring a person back to recognition of what is important: integrity, service, and excellence.
- ✦ **They serve as beacons vectoring us back to the path of professional conduct.** Adherence to the core values ensures the Air Force will not degrade from a climate of ethical commitment into a climate of corrosion.

Integrity First

Integrity is the willingness to do what is right even when no one else is looking. It is the "moral compass"—the inner voice, the voice of self-control, the basis for the trust imperative in today's Air Force.

Integrity is the single most important part of character. It makes Airmen who they are and what they stand for, and is as much a part of their professional reputation as their ability to fly or fix jets, operate a computer network, repair a runway, or defend an airbase. Airmen must be professional, both in and out of uniform. Integrity is not a suit that can be taken off at night or on the weekend or worn only when it is important to look good. Instead, it is the time we least expect to be tested when possessing integrity is critical. People are watching us, not to see us fail, but to see us live up to their expectations. Anything less risks putting the heritage and reputation of the Air Force in peril.

Quotations from the Air Force Memorial in Washington, DC

Integrity; a man's word is his bond.

—General Jimmy Doolittle,
US Army Air Forces Leader of the WWII Tokyo Raid



Integrity is the fundamental premise of service in a free society. Without integrity, the moral pillars of our military strength—public trust and self-respect—are lost.

—General Charles Gabriel, 11th CSAF

We're entrusted with the security of our nation. The tools of our trade are lethal, and we engage in operations that involve risk to human life and untold national treasure. Because of what we do, our standards must be higher than those of society at large.

—General Ronald R. Fogleman, 15th CSAF

There will be demands upon your ability, upon your endurance, upon your disposition, upon your patience...just as fire tempers iron into fine steel so does adversity temper one's character into firmness, tolerance and determination.

—Senator Margaret Chase Smith, Lieutenant Colonel,
US Air Force Reserve

Integrity is the adherence to a strong moral code and consistency in one's actions and values. A person of integrity acts with conviction, demonstrating appropriate self-control without acting rashly. An Airman's word is binding, and honesty is the foundation of that trust. Airmen always behave in a manner that brings credit upon themselves, their unit, the Air Force, and the profession of arms. Airmen should be guided by a deeply held sense of honor, not one of personal comfort or uncontrolled selfish appetites.

Airmen act with confidence, determination, and self-control in all they do to improve themselves and their contribution to the Air Force. They maintain proper professional relationships with subordinates, superiors, and peers as well as possess the moral courage to do what is right even if the personal cost is high. As professionals, Airmen refrain from openly displaying self-pity, discouragement, anger, frustration, or defeatism or displays that would bring discredit upon themselves or the Air Force. Airmen encourage the free flow of information within organizations and never shy from criticism. They actively seek constructive feedback from superiors, peers, and subordinates and take responsibility for their own successes and failures. A person with integrity accepts

the consequences of actions taken, never accepting or seeking undue credit for the accomplishments of others. Airmen also hold each other accountable for their actions and uniformly enforce standards. They ensure all people are treated with equal respect. Finally, Airmen comprehend the awe-inspiring task of defending the Constitution of the United States, maintaining the highest traditions of honoring the Air Force's responsibilities to the nation, and understanding the sacrifices made by others who came before them.

...there is nothing more important to the nation than the integrity and the trustworthiness of the people who defend it and...anyone who doesn't understand that should find another line of work....

**—General Mark A. Welsh, Chief of Staff, United States Air Force
(CSAF), 2014**

Service Before Self

As an Air Force core value, service is not about the Air Force institution, it is about an enduring commitment and dedication of the individual Airman to the age-old military virtue of selfless dedication to duty at all times and in all circumstances. This includes putting one's life at risk if called to do so. It is a willingness to set aside one's needs and to make personal sacrifices. It is an understanding of the 24-hour-a-day commitment, accepting expeditionary deployments and assignments away from home and accomplishing the task at hand no matter the hardship. Service before self means taking the time and making the effort to properly plan and execute with precision regardless of the personal costs. Service before self is total commitment to the highest ideals of personal sacrifice in defense of the Constitution and the United States.

Further, service before self does not mean service before family. Airmen have a duty to the Service and an equally strong duty to their families. The difference is there are times when service to the nation requires subordinating the needs of the family. It is the responsibility of the Airman to prepare and provide for his or her family when deployed or when duty requires it. Airmen understand they have a duty to fulfill the unit's mission. This includes performing to the best of one's abilities the assigned responsibilities and tasks without worrying how a career will be affected. As professionals, they exercise good judgment while performing their duties and understand rules exist for good reason. They also understand service before self asks us to subordinate our personal interests, attitudes, and aspirations to the greater cause and the demands it places on us. It means Airmen place the welfare of their peers and subordinates ahead of their own personal needs or comforts.

Quotations from the Air Force Memorial in Washington, DC



I have been recognized as a hero for my ten minutes of action over Vietnam, but I am no more a hero than anyone else who has served this country.

—A1C John L. Levitow, lowest ranking Air Force Medal of Honor Recipient

Service is a willingness to sacrifice...the setting aside of personal desires, comfort, and security when the safety of the country is at stake.

—General George S. Brown, 8th CSAF and 8th Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff

Service before self is that virtue within us all which elevates the human spirit, compels us to reach beyond our meager selves to attach our spirit to something bigger than we are.

—General John P. Jumper, 17th CSAF

This value also demands each Airman keep “faith” in the system. This does not mean we may not question what we are doing or that we will blindly follow our leaders without a second thought. It means that we place our trust in the processes, procedures, and other Airmen to get the job done and in the right way. Airmen understand an organization can achieve excellence only when all members are encouraged to excel in a cooperative atmosphere free from fear, unlawful discrimination, sexual harassment, intimidation, hazing, or unfair treatment. In addition, Airmen understand they must be loyal to their leaders, fellow Airmen, and the Air Force institution they serve. This includes demonstrated allegiance to the Constitution and loyalty to the military chain of command and to the President and Secretary of Defense.

Excellence in All We Do

This core value demands Airmen constantly strive to perform at their best. It is a commitment to high standards and an understanding that each Airman has been entrusted with our nation’s security. Airmen understand the Air Force mission is very complex and exists in a constantly changing world. They understand that all efforts in planning and executing airpower are designed to ensure the national security interests of the United States. Therefore, they must always strive to meet or exceed standards objectively based on mission needs and continuously search for new and innovative ways to successfully accomplish the mission. It is not only a professional obligation but a moral responsibility as well.

On a personal level, Airmen seek out and complete developmental education; work to stay in their best physical, mental, and moral shape; and continue to enhance their professional competencies. They are diligent to maintain their job skills, knowledge, and personal readiness at the highest possible levels. They understand organizational excellence can only be achieved when its members work together to successfully reach a common goal in an atmosphere that preserves individual self-worth. No Airman wins the fight alone. Each organization should foster a culture that emphasizes a team mentality while maintaining high standards and accomplishing the mission. As stewards of the nation's resources, Airmen should aggressively protect and manage both human and material assets. The most precious resource is people, and it is each Airman's responsibility to ensure he or she is trained, fit, focused, and ready to accomplish the mission safely and effectively.

Quotations from the Air Force Memorial in Washington, DC

The future is always decided by those who put their imagination to work, who challenge the unknown, and who are not afraid to risk failure.

—General Bernard A. Schriever, The Father and Architect of Air Force Space and Ballistic Missile Programs

The power of excellence is overwhelming. It is always in demand and nobody cares about its color.

—General Daniel 'Chappie' James, First African-American United States Air Force Four-Star General

That commitment to excellence is more than desirable; in the profession of arms, it's essential. Lives depend on the fact that we maintain high standards.

—General Michael E. Ryan, 16th CSAF

Courage and innovation form our heritage and excellence is our standard. America's Airmen - Active, Guard, and Reserve - serve as a force unmatched in our air and space.

—General T. Michael 'Buzz' Moseley, 18th CSAF



The Air Force recognizes these core values as *universal and unchanging* in the profession of arms. They provide the standards with which to evaluate the ethical climate of all Air Force organizations. Finally, when needed in the cauldron of war, they

are the beacons vectoring the individual along the path of professional conduct and the highest ideals of integrity, service, and excellence.

In exemplification of the Air Force Core Values, Senior Airman Jason Cunningham performed actions during Operation ENDURING FREEDOM that earned him the thanks of a grateful nation, but at the cost of his life:

CITATION TO ACCOMPANY THE AWARD OF THE AIR FORCE CROSS

(POSTHUMOUS) TO

JASON D. CUNNINGHAM

The President of the United States of America, authorized by Title 10, Section 8742, U.S.C., awards the Air Force Cross to Senior Airman Jason D. Cunningham for extraordinary heroism in military operations against an opposing armed force while serving as a pararescueman near the village of Marzak in the Paktia Province of Afghanistan on 4 March 2002. On that proud day, Airman Cunningham was the primary Air Force Combat Search and Rescue medic assigned to a Quick Reaction Force tasked to recover two American servicemen evading capture in austere terrain occupied by massed Al Qaida and Taliban forces. Shortly before landing, his MH-47E helicopter received accurate rocket-propelled grenade and small arms fire, severely disabling the aircraft and causing it to crash land. The assault force formed a hasty defense and immediately suffered three fatalities and five critical casualties. Despite effective enemy fire, and at great risk to his own life, Airman Cunningham remained in the burning fuselage of the aircraft in order to treat the wounded. As he moved his patients to a more secure location, mortar rounds began to impact within fifty feet of his position. Disregarding this extreme danger, he continued the movement and exposed himself to enemy fire on seven separate occasions. When the second casualty collection point was also compromised, in a display of uncommon valor and gallantry, Airman Cunningham braved an intense small arms and rocket-propelled grenade attack while repositioning the critically wounded to a third collection point. Even after he was mortally wounded and quickly deteriorating, he continued to direct patient movement and transferred care to another medic. In the end, his distinct efforts led to the successful delivery of ten gravely wounded Americans to life-saving medical treatment. Through his extraordinary heroism, superb airmanship, aggressiveness in the face of the enemy, and in the dedication of his service to his country, Senior Airman Cunningham reflected the highest credit upon himself and the United States Air Force.
