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REFLECTIONS ON LEADERSHIP

By Major General Rebecca Vernon

Women's History Month offers an opportunity to celebrate the achievements and contributions women have made to society, in both the past and the present.

These remarks on leadership have been condensed from the speech by Major General Rebecca Vernon, the Deputy Judge Advocate General for the occasion of the Judge Advocate Staff Officer Course (JASOC 23-A's) graduation on 16 December 2022.

Major General Vernon is the first woman to serve as the Deputy Judge Advocate General for the U.S. Air Force.

One Team One Fight

You made it! I am excited to be here and it's a huge honor for me to preside over your graduation. This school is your home now. We all come back to it throughout our careers, and it represents the rich history we have in the JAG Corps. In fact, I started out in this exact same room. I am excited to see your families and friends and the faculty of The JAG School. They all will have such an impact on your life going forward. It's an honor to welcome you on behalf of The Judge Advocate General, [Lieutenant General Charles Plummer](#). Ever since he was Major Plummer, his motto has been: One Team One Fight. He lives that motto every day and our JAG Corps is built upon that foundation.

Sense of Purpose

Why the Air Force and why the JAG Corps? What brought me to the Air Force and inspired me to stay was a sense of purpose. As I spoke to many of you last night, there was a common theme to my question of “Why the JAG Corps?” You come from many different career fields and other services, and yet it’s that call to serve a purpose bigger than yourself that brought you here. In fact, one of your classmates said, “If not me then who?”

“If not me then who?”

The Air and Space Force provide critical national security for our country. You can’t help but be inspired by that, as well as all the amazing things JAGs are doing all over the world. We ensured good order and discipline, and we advised on billions of dollars worth of contracts last year. We operated in support of multiple operations with 140 JAGs deployed all over the world. JAGs on Barrier Analysis Working Groups at the Headquarters level helped make changes I never thought would happen. Lots of changes that may have seemed small to some, but they certainly were not to others—we are all individuals, and diversity is critically important to our Air Force and our JAG Corps. The JAG Corps is also on the cutting edge of innovation.

Teamwork

While the sense of purpose brought me to the JAG Corps, I stayed for the people. What is leadership? It’s figuring out how to work as a team. Teamwork is the heart. The smartest person in the room is never smarter than everyone in the room put together. I could tell from watching your class videos that your class has tremendous comradeire—you will support each other the rest of your career. That is teamwork, and these relationships are so important.

Teamwork doesn’t mean you’re always getting along, that you always agree. *The Innovation Code* by Jeff DeGraff speaks to constructive conflict: you’re not always going

to agree. You need to cultivate that and do it respectfully. DeGraff breaks down common personality traits [by artist, engineer, athlete, and sage] and highlights what each personality brings to the discussion. Everyone has a little bit of each personality, but we tend to identify closer with one. The artist is creative, with great ideas, but they are a little chaotic. Then you have your engineers, who are much like lawyers. Methodical, very process oriented, and stable—but that also makes them resistant to change. Then there’s the athlete, very competitive, very focused, sees a challenge and goes after it. But, sometimes that athlete can be self-centered, a little less collaborative. Lastly, you have your sage, self-reflective and collaborative, values oriented, and but they tend to not be process oriented enough to get things done efficiently. The beauty of teamwork is that you pull all of those attributes together, and that’s where the innovation occurs. Invite everyone to the table and embrace that constructive collaboration. You will find the different personalities complement each other. Be that team, don’t be afraid of conflict. Be respectful, and open minded.

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Diversity

Your class is amazingly diverse, and that makes our JAG Corps strong. Together we are better and you inspire me. Many of you were not born in this country, you’re from Germany, Poland, Sierra Leone. One of you enlisted the day after you got your green card. Some of you are experts in and practice immigration law. It reminds us that a lot of us have families that immigrated to this country. My ask of you is to remember every Airman and Guardian has a story. Take the time to learn everyone’s story. In our practice, we tend to get very busy and caught up in the job that we forget to learn about the people. When you get to know their story, you realize that maybe that justice action isn’t the right fit, but what we really need is to get them some help.

Expectations

What should you expect from us as your senior leaders? Expect the resources and training you need to do your job. We provide you opportunities, and we owe you inspirational leadership to come to work every day.

What do we expect from you? Work hard for the mission as we have an incredibly important national security mission. Work hard for and take care of people. And importantly, take care of yourself.

Be there for your family or whoever is important to you in your life. And make sure that you're present both physically and mentally.

Don't try to be perfect. Don't be afraid to make mistakes. When you make mistakes, that's when you learn. Be proud of the uniform you're wearing, the profession of arms, the choices you made to be here today. But don't be too proud to ask for help. You're always going to need help, regardless of rank. It's not easy what we do. People don't come to us because things are going great. People come to us when something's broken, when things are going wrong. Reach out and help each other through these difficult challenges.

Get out of your comfort zone. Try something totally different. Open your mind. And remember, "You need to let go of the life you planned in order to make room for the one that's waiting for you." The fact you're sitting here means you got out of your comfort zone. Now go and make it happen.

Be principled in what you do. Always ask yourself, what do I stand for, what do I believe in, what do I value? Then live your life in accordance. Remember your shared Air Force values as well as your personal values. You will be challenged in a variety of ways and in the courtroom, but don't forget who you are. Be leaders, followers, mentors and mentees. **A good leader is always a good follower.**

I am incredibly proud of all of you, and I look forward to seeing you out there. You inspire me—learning about you and knowing about you and knowing you made the decision to make the JAG Corps your home.

Congratulations JASOC 23-A!

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About the Speaker



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EXPAND YOUR KNOWLEDGE

External Links to Additional Resources

- **AU Press:** [There from the Beginning](#)
- **National Museum:** nationalmuseum.af.mil/Collections/Research/Womens-History/
- **National Women's Hall of Fame:** womenofthehall.org/women-of-the-hall/
- **PBS:** pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/films/flygirls/
- **Women's History Month:** womenshistorymonth.gov/
- **Women's History Month Video:** dvidshub.net/video/834531/womens-history-month-series