

WE WIN AS A WING, By Gen. Stephen Lorenz, '73

WE LOSE AS A WING

**A STORY OF
SPIRIT AS A
FORCE MULTIPLIER**



“On the fields of friendly strife are sown the seeds that on other days and other fields will bear the fruits of victory.”

—General Douglas MacArthur

I will never forget the night of November 9th, 1996. A well-coached Air Force Academy football team with a phenomenal quarterback solemnly walked off the field at West Point’s Michie Stadium. An average Army football team had just soundly defeated them, 23 to 7. As I looked across the field, I saw the reason why. A sea of 4,000 screaming West Point cadets decked out in Army black and gold jerseys danced in the stands, cheering as one. You see, the Army football team wasn’t only made up by those wearing helmets and shoulder pads. The team also included a highly organized group of cadets, cheerleaders and their band. Together the Army team had one goal in mind—Defeat Air Force!

As I followed the Air Force football team off the field, I realized that our Cadet Wing should work to have the same effect as the Army Corps of Cadets. Although the wing could not help on the field, they could have an impact from the stands. Organized and energized like the Army Cadets were that night, our Cadet Wing could be worth at least three to seven points by the end of the game. In many games, those three to seven points are the difference between winning and losing.

The Air Force football team completed the 1996 season two weeks later with a final record of six wins and five losses. Of all the games that season, six of them were decided by fewer than seven points. Although Air Force beat Notre Dame that year, losses to both Army and Navy forced the Academy to relinquish possession of the Commander-in-Chief’s Trophy for the first time in seven years. As the Commandant of Cadets, I knew we could do more to support the football team. I thought that the team would be a good unifying element within the wing and a means to increase overall morale and pride. In addition, such emphasis could benefit other intercollegiate programs as well.

We formed a Cadet Wing Esprit-de-Corps Committee co-chaired by a member of the Falcon football team and a non-intercollegiate cadet. The committee started by surveying all 40 Cadet Squadrons and each of the four classes to better understand the environment at the Academy. At the time, intercollegiate athletes from 27 teams comprised 25 percent of the Cadet Wing. It was an important study and the results ended up telling a very interesting story.

The committee found there was a significant amount of resentment between the intercollegiate and non-intercollegiate cadets. Non-intercollegiate cadets perceived that the intercollegiate athletes hid behind their privileges, like separate dining, reduced room inspections and less time at mandatory military training events. The intercollegiate athletes expressed frustration that the non-intercollegiate cadets did not appreciate the significant time required on the practice fields. These perceived friction points between the groups would be a major hurdle in building overall wing spirit. If we wanted to make a difference on the “fields of friendly strife,” we needed to move the perceptions within the wing closer together.

After assessing the study results the Cadet Esprit-de-Corps Committee built a plan named, “Operation Restore Thunder.” Its mission was to bridge the gap between intercollegiate and non-intercollegiate cadets. The plan aimed to foster an environment within the Cadet Wing where cadets both feel and demonstrate pride in their Academy and all cadet programs.

The committee’s recommendations benchmarked from established spirit programs at Army, Navy, Texas A&M and the Citadel, and started at the top of the cadet leadership chain. They established a new cadet leadership position (Wing Spirit Officer) and recommended that the new person work and live on wing staff with the captain of the football team.

Together, these two cadet leaders were tasked to build an overall strategic campaign plan on how the entire Cadet Wing team would support not just the football team, but all intercollegiate teams for the entire year. In turn, each Cadet Squadron adopted an intercollegiate team and both the Cadet Squadron Commander and the respective team captain had to brief the Commandant on their yearlong strategic support plans. These plans had to be updated monthly with the Commandant.

The committee also found that most cadets liked living with others who have similar tastes, backgrounds, and experiences. If we were going to get each group to understand the other’s challenges and build a true wing team, we needed to get them away from this tendency and “walk in each other’s shoes.” What better way to do that than to live and work together? So, the committee recommended a policy that aimed to “integrate” all cadets; forcing intercollegiate athletes to start living with non-intercollegiate cadets. It was not a popular policy, but over time the new roommates gained an understanding for each other’s challenges.

The Cadet Wing began publishing a master calendar that included specific “Games of the Week.” They encouraged all Academy mission elements to avoid scheduling events that conflicted with those games so that more cadets could attend and lend their support. We created Cadet Spirit Awards and designed a blue “Spirit Jersey” to be worn at games. We even started preparing the battlefield during the cadet’s first summer in Basic Cadet Training. Upon acceptance into the Cadet Wing, the Wing Spirit Officer gave all new cadets a briefing about specific “spirit responsibilities.” They told the new cadets that they were the engine that produced the energy to keep the Academy’s spirit machine running smoothly.

We instituted the Outstanding Military Athlete Award. We reinstated car rallies

and spirit dinners. After specific games, we had the coaches and team captains thank the Cadet Wing for their support. We established a weekly Air Tasking Order (ATO) to support the teams. The ATO described the spirit plan of attack for specific games and periods of time. At every game the Chief of Wing Spirit was responsible for coordinating the Cadet Wing, cheerleaders and Drum and Bugle Corps. We developed scripts for contingences at the games. The scripts further developed the ATO and described when to cheer, what to chant—and even went into great detail on how the plan would change based on score and phase of the game. Once again, we required the Cadet Wing to stand up in the bleachers whenever the team was on the field. When we sang the Third Verse of the Air Force Song, the Cadet Wing went out on the football field to show solidarity with the team. The cadets formed a line and held hands with the team as the entire wing sang together.

We had plans whether we won or lost and were always there to support the team. None of these ideas were original, but three things were different: every idea fit into the cadet-built strategic spirit plan, the cadets implemented all aspects of the plan, and the plan had the support of the Superintendent, Dean, Commandant, Director of Athletics and the coaches. The plan supported our initial goals—improve cadet morale, build pride in the Academy, and unite all of the Academy mission elements towards a common goal—defeat the opposition! Slowly but surely the “me” mentality transformed into a “we” mentality. After all, we go to war as a team and not as individuals.

We kicked off the next football season in August of 1997 with our great football coach, Fisher DeBerry, briefing each of the four cadet groups. Coach DeBerry emphasized how important the entire Cadet Wing was to victory. He talked about teamwork, about how the Cadet Wing’s energy and spirit made a difference on the field. The first game of the season was against Idaho during Parent’s Weekend. The cadet strategic plan, the “ATO,” contained a day-by-day schedule that called for a car rally, a spirit dinner and a major pep rally to build spirit in preparation for the game. It also set up a time for the Wing Spirit Officer to utilize our new public address system to practice new cheers with the Cadet Wing, cheerleaders and Drum and Bugle Corps. The battle slogan became “Feel the Thunder,” and everyone at the Academy greeted each other with that cry.

In the beginning, the 4th Class Cadets and those cadet leaders responsible for the plan accounted for most of the participation. Many cadets thought “spirit” was spontaneous and resisted organized motivation. The first game against Idaho was very close, but Air Force was victorious, 14 to 10. As we all stood on the field in Falcon Stadium, holding hands, singing the “third verse,” many in the stands felt the Cadet Wing team had made a difference. The next week when we were getting ready for an away game at Rice, Coach DeBerry and the team captains thanked the Cadet Wing for the energy that helped in the victory. The wing stood and cheered. We crushed Rice 41 to 12. The next week, the team came back home to the Academy and squeaked by UNLV by just one point, 25 to 24. Coach DeBerry once again thanked the wing for making a difference.

Our next game was critical, against our in-state conference rival, Colorado State University. The previous year, we watched a large halftime lead turn into a difficult loss at home by only one point—it was a real heartbreaker. The cadet leadership decided to pull out all the stops. The plan called for a 1,000 cadet-strong contingent

to fill the stadium in Fort Collins. We ended up sending even more to the game—the setting was electric. We totally dominated the field and beat them 24 to zero!

We won four of the next six games. Of those games, five of them saw the game end with a margin less than seven points. The next big game was now against the Army Knights at Falcon Stadium. The Commander-in-Chief’s Trophy was in play because we had previously defeated Navy by three. The ATO built up the spirit and anticipation during the week leading up to Saturday’s game. There were lots of terrific spirit banners and pep rallies. We even scheduled fly-bys from both the Air Force and the Army. However, this year it was all strategically thought out and run by the cadets with one goal in mind for the Cadet Wing team—Beat Army!

The Cadet Wing marched onto the field wearing BDU’s before the game. Many in the stands thought they should have worn service dress, but it was all for effect. Right before kickoff, the entire wing removed their BDU tops revealing bright blue Air Force spirit jerseys. The giant sea of blue stunned everyone. This was followed by 16 F-16’s in afterburner that flew over during kick off. Army never had a chance. We destroyed them 24 to nothing. I remember walking by the West Point Superintendent and Commandant and exclaiming, “We stole all of your spirit ideas.” The wing continued their spirited support and helped the football team to ten wins and a post-season bowl appearance that season. All told, the Cadet Wing was flying high.

Away from the football field, the other intercollegiate teams enjoyed the support of the 40 Cadet Squadrons as well. Can you imagine 75 cadets cheering on the rifle team in the middle of the week, or 50 cadets showing up to support the fencing team? It happened because the cadet leadership made it happen. Now, I am not saying all the cadets bought into the Strategic Spirit Plan, but the more they saw the positive results their efforts created, the more they wanted to participate.

The following year witnessed even more success. The football team won 12 games, finished the season nationally ranked, and crushed the Washington Huskies 45 to 25 in a post-season bowl game. After the last game of the regular season, the Cadet Wing approached the Director of Athletics and asked to tear down the goal posts in Falcon Stadium. Now, goal posts are expensive and new ones were certainly not in the budget. I was impressed with the request and excited when the Athletic Director actually let them do it in the name of the Academy spirit.

More than a dozen years have passed since those young cadets built and implemented the, “Operation Restore Thunder” Spirit plan for the Cadet Wing. These cadets are now Captains and Majors in our United States Air Force and many have seen combat in Iraq and Afghanistan. They helped improve the tradition of team excellence at our Air Force Academy and have carried that winning attitude with them into their military and civilian careers. The spirit committee ended its initial briefing to the Cadet Wing with a quote from John Wooden, the well-known collegiate men’s basketball coach. “Success is a peace of mind which is a direct result of self-satisfaction in knowing you did your best to become the best you are capable of becoming.” I believe that all the cadets, both on and off the athletic fields, internalized this ideal. Today, our Air Force and Nation are all the better for it. 🟩