

A CHAT WITH THE NATIONAL COMMANDER

By Maj. Kevin Barry

Civil Air Patrol members may know of the position of the national commander, but most don't have a clear understanding of what the job entails. Members may say the national commander runs CAP, and they would be half right. The National Headquarters is at Maxwell Air Force Base, with about 102 paid staff working there. They are directed by and report to Executive Director Donald Rowland. Maj. Gen. Amy Courter, as national commander, oversees the volunteer side of the organization, the 61,000 members. In addition to overseeing the members through the Region commanders, she has a volunteer national staff who report to her through the chief of staff and two senior advisers.

At the 2010 Northeast Region (NER) conference, I had opportunity to sit down and talk with General Courter about her CAP career, being the national commander and her future plans. Sitting in for the interview with General Courter were Maj. James Ridley, NER director of public affairs, and C/Capt. Kerri Sheridan of Sullivan County Cadet Squadron, both from New York Wing.

The general always had a love of aviation. She remembers as an eight-year-old walking the three miles by herself to the nearby Bishop Airport. She would go to the end of her street, cross the nearby creek, hike up the other side, and use the viaduct under the expressway and over the railroad tracks. She would hang out at the field to watch the airplanes or visit with one of her neighbors who worked in the airport control tower. This was a great experience until her mother found out she was walking all the way to the airport! While in high school she was very involved with the local Law Enforcement Explorers group, but could not stay in the program when she graduated from high school. Devastated that she had to leave and could not use the emergency services skills that she had learned, another explorer member, Steven Chung, mention that her skills could be used in CAP. She never heard of CAP before, but she found and joined the local CAP unit. She was due to enter Kalamazoo College. At the time, she thought, "I'm not going to have time to do a lot."

"But I took my uniforms with me," she recalled. "I did end up connecting and Civil Air Patrol is like family, whether you're at home or someplace else." After college she "got into business because there was no teaching positions available" near to her mom whose health was failing. Settling in the Detroit area, she rejoined CAP as part of the Starfire Squadron and was assigned as the safety officer, a position that she totally enjoyed, before being later assigned as the squadron commander when both the deputy commander and the commander left CAP simultaneously. For her it was the best, favorite and hardest job, but one where she says "you can see the long term results."

She rose through the ranks, as deputy group commander then as group commander. With members working hard, with enrollment up and being named Michigan Wing's Group of the Year, she was "having the time of my life." Then Wing Vice Commander Lt. Col. Bill Charles (now Colonel Charles, CAP national controller) called to meet with her. Her first reaction was to phone all her staff, asking, "Did we do anything wrong that I'm not aware of?" At the meeting the wing vice-commander told her: "I need you to take this seriously, this is really, really important." Courter remembers thinking, "Oh no! What trouble am I in now?" He said, "I need you to be my vice commander when I become the commander." He told her she was doing a great job.

It “was never in my thought process that I would be the wing vice commander,” she said. Not only did she serve as vice commander, but also later as Michigan Wing commander.

When the position of national vice commander was open, she said, “I had not thought about tossing my hat in to the ring.” But a few very influential friends urged her to think about it. Because of having a very successful career at Valassis, a global \$2.3 billion public marketing services corporation, she was in a position to be able to do it. In 2006 she was elected national vice commander; also for a time she served additional duty as the national chief of staff.

General Courter was given the reins of running CAP during a very troubled time in CAP history; she was appointed acting national commander in 2007 to stabilize CAP during an unanticipated transition in the organization. General Courter was very open discussing the transition.

“It can be hard to figure out what is wrong. But what helped me was being the vice commander because I had had a year of watching the position and before that, I also was a national committee chair of one type or other and ran national activities for many years after completing my term as wing commander. So, I was connected enough to know what was happening. I found very, very quickly this was not an insular problem.”

It was not a problem with just one person in one area.

“The reality is if we have an organization and a culture that allows those things to get out of hand, the problem is much deeper than that.”

Very early on General Courter was under a tremendous amount of scrutiny. “Because, if an organization can have these problems, it’s not about the people, it’s about the system, too. But sometimes you (the system) make it too easy for people to do things that are not right. It’s important to fix the system that failed us, and not just believe that people failed us.”

She recalled meeting several different general officers and no matter where she was or who she was talking with, the theme of the discussions was that this problem has been going on way too long and you better “stabilize your organization”. The theme of stabilize your organization – creating more transparency and improving fairness in opportunities.

“Inside the organization it’s hard to hear the problems; outside they know,” she said. “People think of clean-up as a one time event, but stabilization needed to be unending. Stabilize is about a culture, about systems and that the people make that all happen.” And to make that possible the best people needed to be given the chance to do it. With a commitment to transparency and to reclaim the public trust, she said she recruited the best qualified members for the volunteer national staff team. With that team operating, she said, she was able to stabilize the organization – creating more transparency and improving fairness in opportunities.

One change that was implemented was the way region commanders were selected. To make this a more fair process, candidates for region commanders are interviewed with the wing commanders giving feedback on the nominees. “The intent was that you tell me who the best people are and who you want to work with. They may be working for me but they are working with you.”

When asked what she liked the most being a commander, she responded: “Making a difference, and at the higher levels, it gives you a chance to make a bigger difference.” What she has done with her volunteer career, whether at CAP or one of her boards she serves on, “is to find ways to be a change agent.” The general explained that change is like opposite sides of a coin, one side likes it while the other side disapproves of it. “We have had tremendous changes at CAP.” One of the biggest changes has been with the online services, making it easier and quicker for the members to use. National staff can take data, transform it into information,

transform it into knowledge, and then transform that into action to help the members. Changes like that were needed because when she became the commander, it was difficult for her to focus on the metrics – the members, their readiness for missions, and the like. Basically, CAP needed to have a dashboard full of information to help the leaders lead. And under her guidance that information is readily accessible to commanders throughout the organization.

Another issue of importance to the General, and is in the starting phase, is to find out what makes “CAP the best place to volunteer,” to finding out from members what makes them join and stay. She believes if members have good things to do, (making CAP missions so incredibly important), and they are managed and treated well, then CAP will be a “best place to volunteer.” One example of striving to do this is the Organizational Excellence Program that helps mentor the members to make it easier to work within CAP.

General Courter’s business skills translated very well for managing CAP, but she also brought a leadership style that lets her staff know how she makes decisions and what values she uses.

“I like to work with people, people don’t work for me. My leadership style is that of servant leadership. Flip that pyramid so it is pointing down. You all are on my shoulders; my responsibility is to carry you. You all are doing the work and your responsibility is to the organization.”

Even though General Courter heads and represents a large corporate CAP organization, there is no salary for the position; it would be extremely difficult to balance a job and leading CAP. Since becoming the commander, she has taken a hiatus from her consulting firm she founded and has the ability “to be living off of what I made in the past”. Now that her term is almost over, she has started looking into resuming a career, and is excited to think of the possibilities.

Travel is a big part of being the commander, but there is no CAP aircraft with aircrew to transport her around the county. It is all done by commercial airlines, and she very rarely has an opportunity to fly in CAP aircraft. She is reimbursed for most expenses but doesn’t put in for all of her travel expenses. As commander she has reduced the travel budget, she travels with fewer staff members. Because there is not a paid administrative staff for the national commander, she had a few volunteers who can help with some correspondences, but Courter does a lot of paperwork herself. She explained while serving as vice president with Valassis, she would fly 60,000 miles a year to keep up with her global responsibilities. During the first year as national commander, she felt she really needed to be out in the field for the members because they were so enraged and upset about the situation at National, so she flew 100,000 miles to hear their input that year. These days she averages about 80,000 miles a year in travel, but some months are worse than others. In September she was home for just three days and one of those nights she spent opening a new squadron, the Major Kevin Adams Memorial Composite Squadron, named after a younger CAP friend who died from cancer. In that month she traveled from her home to San Diego for the week-long National Conference, then to Washington, DC for Air Force Reserve Policy meeting, out to Seattle, Washington for the IACE planning conference, then back to Washington, DC for more meetings.

“At that point I’m not sure how I should set my watch!”

To travel to a region conference, she left home 5:30 a.m. Sunday to travel to San Francisco for meetings all week. She was at the hotel shuttle bus pick-up at 3:15 a.m. Friday so she could arrive late Friday night for the conference in Massachusetts. She loves attending conferences because they are a “fishbowl of information” from members. It is one way to gauge if a program or event is living up to expectations. She also regularly stops at NHQ from a few days to up to more than a week, depending on activities like National Staff College, Cadet Officer School or

meetings at Maxwell AFB. Because of the renovations to the headquarters and using temporary buildings, she felt a little like a squadron commander holding meetings out of the trunk of the car this past year.

There is no slowing down for the General with strategic planning and goals still to be met before her term ends. Some of the hot spots that she has seen progress in, but would like to see more, is making CAP the “resource of choice” for search and rescue, disaster relief, homeland security and counterdrug missions. Developing those relationships with other agencies is a long-term process, “getting missions is where the income comes from that we operate with.” When a potential customer can get to see what CAP is doing, like at Deepwater Horizon or other missions, they may be willing to work with CAP in the future. Looking back on some of the accomplishments during her term, a major one is leaving CAP in a stable position. With two unqualified (“A+”) audits, the Operational Resource Management System (ORMS) has earned high praise from the Air Force. Plus there is the consolidated aircraft maintenance program. All of these have helped with accountability and efficiency for CAP.

When asked about future plans after her term ends in August 2011, she laughed: “I owe my neighbors big time for all they have done taking care of my cat and house while I have been away the last few years.” A few months off, attending to the deferred maintenance needed for her house and reconnecting with family and friends are what she is hoping for. She loves her tight-knit lakeside community, 15 miles from Ann Arbor. She is willing to continue to serve CAP nationally, but is anxious to become re-qualified for emergency services and involved at the local squadron.