TOPGUN'S TOP 10

LEADERSHIP LESSONS FROM THE COCKPIT

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New York Nashville

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SARAH, your selfless dedication as a military spouse enabled me to live my dreams, even when we had to take a rain check on yours.

TO MY CHILDREN: Ryan, Nathan, and Natalie. Be relentless in discovering and pursuing your passion in life. Always remember, nothing worthwhile is ever easy.

TO THE TOPGUN STAFF: In a world awash in change, your steadfast devotion to maintaining the highest professional standards makes all the difference. Non sibi sed patriae . . . Not for self, but country.

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CHAPTER TWO

NOTHING WORTHWHILE IS EVER EASY

“…the standard is *the standard*. It is unflinching and unforgiving.”

One of the first responsibilities assigned to a new TOPGUN instructor is to become *the* subject-matter expert for a particular specialty. Topics include dogfighting, aerial combat, attacking ground targets, the specifics of enemy aircraft, other nations' missile-defense systems, aerial radars, advanced training, and many more—in all, approximately thirty subjects that turn into TOPGUN classroom lectures. Each instructor is expected to master one of these highly technical areas. Heady stuff for a staff consisting mostly of junior officers fresh off their first tours of fleet duty—a requirement for admission with few exceptions.

Incredibly, these staff members, twenty-five in all,

set the aerial combat standards for the entire U.S. Navy and Marine Corps—approximately 339,000 sailors and 185,000 marines. A single person is the recognized expert for more than a half-million service members. The pressure to perform is high…and starts from day one.

Decades ago, TOPGUN graduates returned immediately to the fleet to continue their tours before being selected to return as instructors. In each class, only a few aviators were themselves destined to become TOPGUN instructors. Now, students are identified as possible staff members before they arrive; they receive additional scrutiny while training and become instructors the day they graduate.

Shortly after I finished the course, senior TOPGUN instructors pulled me into an office to inform me which area I'd be expected to learn about and then teach. Four lectures were due for rotation, and each needed a new instructor. Which would I be assigned?

Rotations and assignments are carefully timed, a consideration made more important as TOPGUN teaches only three classes per year. Proper timing provides continuity for the staff, as senior instructors pass

along experience and knowledge to junior ones. The staff needed the new team members to commence our training in order to replace instructors due to leave within six to eight months.

I was thrilled to be assigned air-to-air mission planning, considered by instructors to be one of the staff's more important and difficult lectures. My assignment was due to timing more than anything else but also in part because I'd attended graduate school for engineering at MIT, since math and risk management make up the foundation for air-to-air mission planning. The weight of the assignment hit me when I learned the nickname for the process I was expected to master: *the murderboard*.

A murderboard is the recitation of the entire lecture that will ultimately be presented to the students, but first it is presented to the rest of the instructors to ensure new candidates are ready—TOPGUN's equivalent of defending a PhD dissertation. In my case, I'd be required to stand in front of fifty current and former instructors and present a 236-slide, four-hour lecture—all from memory.

That's one aspect that makes TOPGUN's murderboard process unique: the briefer isn't allowed to refer to notes or even *look* at the slides (although rare exceptions are made if, for example, referring to a chart). My murderboard was already tentatively scheduled for six months down the road. It was time to get to work.

I couldn't help but consider the situation. *How in the world will I ever be able to give a four-hour presentation from memory?*

The task seemed daunting. Compounding the pressure was the expectation from senior instructors that I would simultaneously maintain a robust flight schedule. Large chunks of each day would be consumed flying missions as "red air" (simulating enemy aircraft) against the new crop of students.

To help new instructors conquer this assignment, the staff created the "pre-board process." Each new instructor has four months to research their topic, work with the outgoing instructor expert, develop new recommendations, and create their own presentation. In my case, the previous expert had already departed, so I learned primarily by studying the slides he had left

behind. He did visit periodically, and we found time for me to question him on the fundamentals of aerial combat—in my case, creating procedures to be used by aircrew when fighting against other aircraft.

The daily schedule initially proved hectic. Typically, I'd arrive before dawn to fly the day's first red air mission. Once I had flown and debriefed the first mission, I'd grab a quick bite for lunch before hustling in for the red air briefing for a second flight. After the second flight and debrief, I was off to my desk to study for several more hours. Soon, this routine—one or two flights per day followed by murderboard preparation—became second nature.

My first four months on the staff flew by. Before I knew it, I was asked to give my first pre-board, the first of eight practice lectures taught to a small number of instructors.

The bar for each pre-board is high, but it's intended to help new instructors improve through incredibly specific feedback on every aspect of the lecture. Of course, it didn't always feel this way when I was on the receiving end. For my first pre-board, three senior TOPGUN

instructors sat around a conference table to observe and evaluate. I had to provide each with a stack of "critique sheets," formatted so an instructor could quickly spot an error, write down the corresponding slide number, and describe the error and its needed correction.

Feedback covered *everything*. Was there a typo on the slide? Caught and recorded. When I forgot part of my presentation and needed to sneak a glance at the slide to remember where I was, they annotated "slide peek" to remind me where I had stumbled. They noted when I tried to teach a concept that didn't make sense or was unclear. Fillers like "uh" or "um" were forbidden. Nothing escaped their attention.

My first pre-board didn't go well. I stumbled through many of the concepts and needed to turn and look at the slides more than a dozen times. Some of the built-in questions I used to test attendees' knowledge were so poorly worded that the instructors didn't understand what I was asking or how to respond. By the time we finished the four-hour ordeal, each instructor had amassed more than ten pages of notes. One instructor caught more than 150 errors I'd made during the presentation.

I felt wiped out, mentally and physically, and that was before we even started *their* debrief of my lecture.

When my debrief ended (ninety challenging minutes later), two instructors departed to resume their day's schedule. The third instructor, the same one who had flown my rush ride to get into TOPGUN, hung back to chat with me as I stood by the conference room door.

Patting me on the shoulder, he said, "Bus, never forget…nothing worthwhile is ever easy. Pre-boards are an extremely tough process by design." It was obvious he knew I was unhappy with my performance. "We purposely break you down," he continued, "so we can build you back up. Every one of us here has worked their way through it. Trust me, there's nothing special about any of us. If we can do it, so can you." With a final slap on the back, he headed out to leave me alone with my thoughts.

I sat down at the conference table. Collecting all the notes on the table, I slowly thumbed through each page. "Missile misspelled on slide 16," one comment read.

"Slow start," wrote another instructor. "You sounded robotic until slide 14."

"You looked behind yourself twice on slide 138—spend more time practicing this part," wrote a third.

A light bulb went on for me. There was no doubt that being in the spotlight was painful. The pre-board process ensured I couldn't hide any of my flaws. Everything was fair game, from the slides I'd created to my mannerisms to the tidiness of my uniform. Even the way I held a wooden pointer while teaching about aircraft maneuvers was open to criticism.

But as I took a closer look at their feedback, I realized every comment was blunt and straightforward—none was cruel or mean. It wasn't personal. These instructors were helping me identify every area that needed to be tweaked, corrected, practiced, or reworked to help me be the *best* instructor I could possibly be. Every slide typo caught by an instructor now would be corrected long before I gave my murderboard. The TOPGUN staff's process was obvious: iron sharpens iron. They were doing me a favor by holding me to an incredibly high standard, whether it was my very first pre-board or the very last. The meaning was clear: the standard is *the standard*. It is unflinching and unforgiving.

Cracking this code restored my motivation. Day after day, I slowly improved. I made note cards representing every slide in my lecture. Based on a helpful hint from another instructor, I separated the cards into manageable chunks representing the five parts of my presentation. I practiced in the car while driving to work in the morning, then again while returning home at night. The sheer magnitude of the overall lecture seemed daunting, but I found that it appeared more manageable when I broke it into bite-sized pieces. That realization helped build my confidence.

Soon, it was time for my murderboard, a day I'll always remember. Traditionally, instructors bring in breakfast snacks and beverages to feed staff members before the lecture. The food I brought felt like a sacrificial offering to the angry murderboard gods; their decision about whether I had passed the test would determine my fate.

My stomach churned as I watched the other instructors file in. I'm fair-skinned and could feel the heat creep into my temples as I flushed with nervousness. But I persevered, moving toward the door for the mandatory

countdown. Glancing at my watch, I barked, "Thirty seconds!" while closing the door. Slowly returning to the podium, I stole a second glance to verify my timing. "Ten seconds…five, four, three, two, one…and hack." "Hack" being the term for marking the exact GPS time and a technique used to guarantee everyone in the room was precisely in sync.

To ensure we are able to maintain eye contact with the audience, we're required to avoid looking at the keyboard. So, without looking down, I reached over with my left hand and pressed the Enter key to bring up my first slide. I began my memorized introduction by saying, "The Chinese Air Force experienced an incredibly low kill ratio at the beginning of World War II. Enter U.S. Army Capt. Claire Chenault, who in 1941 formed the First American Volunteer Group, more commonly known by their nickname, the Flying Tigers…."

I shared a story to explain the vital importance of air-to-air mission planning before launching into my first slides about key concepts and definitions. Within a few minutes, I felt the heat recede from my face as months

of training and practice kicked into gear. I was off and running.

A few hours later, I received the verdict: I had passed with flying colors.

TOPGUN's arduous process paid off. I had successfully presented a four-hour lecture from memory—a seemingly unthinkable task just six months ago. I had scaled my personal Everest.

The murderboard experience taught me the power of perseverance. It trained me to dig deep, to tap into reserves of strength I never knew I had.

TOPGUN instructors aren't superhuman. Once upon a time, we were all typical, confused high school students. Few of us had graduated as class valedictorian. Many of us had even found ourselves in trouble at various times during our youth. But here we all were, aviators united by a common desire to be the best we could be. ***With direction, teamwork, and a universal adherence to unflinching standards, we made it.***

It's easy to get bogged down and feel overwhelmed when faced with adversity or a seemingly insurmountable

task. Who hasn't rested their head in their hands while studying for a big exam or thrown their arms into the air with frustration after a particularly tough episode at work? Upon reflection, though, we realize these are simply fleeting moments in time. Continue to rely on your hard work, dedication, and pursuit of excellence to carry you through. Recognize that there are no shortcuts. Tackle your tough problems head-on and continue to strive for success that sometimes seems just a little out of reach. You have to earn your success…each and every day.

Make today better than yesterday.

Do the same tomorrow.

Just remember, ***nothing worthwhile is ever easy***.