



Vice Admiral Thad W. Allen
Chief of Staff,
 United States Coast Guard



What is your relationship to the U.S. Coast Guard Academy?

- Class of 1971 (Co-Captained Football Team).
- Extensive interaction with Academy as Captain of the Port/Group Long Island Sound from 1993-96.
- Continuing relationship with CGA, the Leadership Development Center, Officer Candidate School, as a Flag Officer through Board of Trustees, Operations Spotlights, and visits.

How would you describe your current leadership role?

Three roles:

1. Chief of Staff (*direct the “business” operations of the CG*),
2. Commanding Officer CG Headquarters,
3. Chair, Department of Homeland Security Joint Requirements Council.

What is your first memorable leadership experience?

Being trapped in the radio room of my first ship (USCGC ANDROSCOGGIN) with four other people during a fire in the Yard and surviving. My roommate and I tore away the insulation on the bulkhead and beat SOS with the emergency destruction ax and someone on the dock heard us.

What do you consider your favorite leadership experience?

Three-way tie:

1. First command, CO CG LORAN Station Lam-pang, Thailand during the last months of the Vietnam War (1974-75);
2. Commander, CG Group Atlantic City (1979-1982);
3. Commander, Seventh CG District (1999-2001).

My current position as the Coast Guard’s Chief of Staff is very challenging but being in command and dealing directly with people in an op-

erational environment is the epitome of Coast Guard leadership.

What do you consider your most difficult leadership challenge?

1. The one I have now as the Principal Federal Official for Hurricane Katrina.
2. Two way tie for second:
 - A. to crack down on drug use at LORSTA Lam-pang and turn the unit around;
 - B. establish credibility with the Cuba-American community in South Florida regarding how the Coast Guard executes its responsibilities following the use of pepper spray against migrants in the water, the drowning of a migrant following a collision with a CG Patrol Boat, and the operational and political issues associated with the recovery of Elian Gonzales.

What leadership book would you recommend to others, particularly college-aged students?

Leadership skills are acquired through the development of values and character augmented by personal experience. Books help but there is no best model.

The best pure lessons in becoming a leader I’ve encountered are in two literary pieces: the short story *The Secret Sharer* by Joseph Conrad and *Billy Budd* by Herman Melville. The role of values, ethical thinking, and decision making in leaders is never more striking than in these two pieces.

Leadership books are helpful but the ability to remove yourself from “relative plot” where you are at the center of the maneuvering board and see the world though “true plot” is most important. Some books that have done that for me are:

Leadership Profile Series
 Department of Management
 United States Coast Guard Academy
 New London, Connecticut 06320

The U.S. Coast Guard Academy's
 Department of Management
 earned accreditation
 in April 2005.

It is the smallest accredited
 undergraduate Management
 program in the world.



“...being in command and dealing directly with people in an operational environment is the epitome of Coast Guard leadership.”



Source: Associated Press

1. *The Journey of Man: A Genetic Odyssey*, Spencer Wells (dispels many myths about race).
2. *Longitude: The True Story of a Lone Genius Who Solved the Greatest Scientific Problem of His Time*: Dava Sobel. You'll never think about Navigation Lab the same way again.
3. *Alexander Hamilton*: Ron Chernow (NY Times Top Ten List for 2004). The Father of the Coast Guard is arguably the “Greatest American that was never elected President.”

Why would you recommend that book?

These books have informed, educated, and enlightened me. Good leaders are never diminished by learning. They make it a life long practice. When I was Commanding Officer of CITRUS (1982-84) the crew complained of the number of drills and training we did. I placed a plaque on the cabin door that said “The Only Billet In The Coast Guard That Is Not A Training Billet Is Commandant.” I did this to reinforce that training and education are required throughout your career and life.

What is one thought or insight you would provide to tomorrow's leaders?

The term “status quo” is an oxymoron, or to quote the second law of thermodynamics, entropy is increasing. The universe is more complicated one second from now than it is at the present. Change is continual. The pace of change is accelerating. There is less time to make decisions and react to the external environ-

ment. Acquire the skills and tools that will help you succeed in that environment. My favorite definition of leadership is the ability to reconcile opportunity and competency. What constitutes an opportunity (threat, vulnerability, or risk) and what defines the competencies needed to exploit it or react to it is the greatest challenge of your generation.

What is one personal challenge you would offer to tomorrow's leaders?

Set the bar high regarding your personal growth and intellectual development. Learn your trade well and then understand the context in which you ply your trade. Immediately assume that you don't know enough and have a thirst to learn and be curious about everything that impacts your professional life. THEN, learn to sort the “important many” from the “precious few” as to how you should act, learn, and acquire more knowledge. Continually fight the “tyranny of the present” and act with “strategic intent” in your work, career, and family life.

What key traits or characteristics do you look for when deciding which individuals will successfully transform from follower to leader?

1. Intelligence ... but that alone doesn't guarantee success.
2. The ability to “speak truth to power” (keeping in mind the “manners of our profession”). If someone can't walk into my office and tell me the truth, I should quit or fire them.



Source: FEMA/Mark Wolfe

have often told new ensigns to remember “what you were taught” not necessarily “how you were taught.” The biggest mistake a cadet can make is to confuse the “what” with the “how.” Accept the challenge offered by the Academy, don’t let it “rent space in your head.” Separate the tyranny of the present from your strategic intent. We need you on the bridge, in the cockpit, and in the command centers. We need you ready to assume the watch.

In your opinion, what is the value of experience in uniform in the context of leadership and/or personal development?

3. Interpersonal skills that indicate that other people are more important than you are. We achieve larger goals through the ability to organize human effort in new ways that transcend traditional organizational structures and focus our collective energies on a higher purpose.
4. A sense of humor and the ability to laugh at yourself. People that are carrying “baggage” and dealing with their own issues can’t help others or lead their organizations effectively.

Uniformed service presents a legal, moral, and personal construct by which to act, judge your actions and outcomes, and be judged. We have uniformed services to develop a cadre of individuals who are capable of doing hard things at the most difficult times. On a football team, they start with two-a-day workouts to toughen the team mentally and physically. How do you prepare for a life time of service that involves per-

In your opinion, what is the value of a Service Academy education in the context of leadership and/or personal development?

Service Academies are leadership incubators and personal growth accelerators. The demands of our Service and our Country cannot wait for slow maturation of leaders. Drugs are en route this country, terrorists mean to do us harm, our borders need to be secure. We need a means to create intelligent and knowledgeable leaders, to test them in low threat environments, to prepare them to lead and manage in an increasingly complex world ... and we have 4 years to do it with cadets and less with other accession routes. I



Source: FEMA/Jocelyn Augustino

“Leaders are rarely held accountable for failures associated with external factors that they do not control when they have demonstrated the ability to consider relevant facts before acting.”



Source: FEMA/Jocelyn Augustino

“Winging it is what gets people into trouble.”

sonal sacrifice, leading men and women in crisis, and serving the public above yourself? Replace “two-a-days” with four years and call it a service academy.

Do you have a closing thought you would leave with students studying your profile?

There is no right way to “be” a leader. Circumstances will always challenge your own mental toughness, intelligence, and professional knowledge. There are always a number of ways to handle a given situation. Build the skills, talent, and professionalism that will allow you to make the best decision when there is incomplete information, not enough time to obtain the information you need, and high consequences associated with options available. Build mental models to make decisions so that regardless of the outcome you can explain the basis for your decisions. Leaders are rarely held accountable for failures associated with external factors that they do not control when they have demonstrated the

ability to consider relevant facts before acting. “Winging it” is what gets people into trouble.

If you are interested in follow-on contact by one or more students, what is the preferred venue to contact you (i.e. E-mail, etc)?

ccs@comdt.uscg.mil

Learn More About Vice Admiral Allen, his career, and his work with the United States Coast Guard:

<http://www.uscg.mil//>

<http://www.uscgstormwatch.com//>

NOTE: On September 9, 2005, Vice Admiral Allen was placed in charge of the federal government’s Hurricane Katrina relief efforts along the Gulf Coast of the United States.