Taking Charge

Top Volunteers Gain Leadership Edge at National Staff College

By Kimberly Harper

An egg, drinking straws, a plastic cup and masking tape served as simple tools in a team-building exercise that was anything but simple. The task -- drop an egg from 10 feet without breaking it using a dozen straws and masking tape. No matter the fate of the egg, the objective was for the students to learn about themselves, group dynamics and how to bring out the best in others.

The weeklong National Staff College training gave the 52 participants, some of CAP’s finest volunteers, a comprehensive understanding of the organization’s rich heritage and the varied challenges facing anyone in a position of responsibility. This strong foundation fostered the students’ development, from volunteers highly skilled in their niches to ones primed for leadership in an organization evolving to meet the needs of 21st century America.

Maj. Timothy Steppan of the South Dakota Wing’s Sioux Falls Composite Squadron, the 2005 Moral Leadership Officer of the Year, credited the course with giving him a better grasp of strategic-thinking essentials for successful CAP leadership.

“Through the NSC, I was able to broaden my vision and think outside the box,” he said.

Maj. Sonia Soto, testing and personnel officer at Puerto Rico Wing Headquarters, cherished the opportunity to work closely with her peers in the continental U.S.

“Just being here is a big accomplishment,” she said.

Instead of merely listening to lectures in a sterile classroom environment, the attendees brought life to the concepts discussed by interacting in a dynamic group setting without the divisions of rank or ribbons.

Lt. Col. John Eggen, the Arizona Wing’s legislative liaison officer, praised the multifaceted lessons:
“You can’t focus on any one area. It’s all important,” he said.

Eggen was particularly impressed with the pearls of wisdom presented by Air University Commander Air Force Lt. Gen. Stephen R. Lorenz. About Lorenz, he mused, “Where have you been all of my corporate life?”

To help students blossom into the best leaders they can possibly be, CAP enlisted the services of 18 instructors selected from business; Air University at Maxwell Air Force Base, Ala.; the CAP executive leadership; and the CAP National Headquarters staff.

“We prepare them for the challenges of leadership by showing them strategies for moving CAP into the future,” said Lt. Col. Peggy Myrick, director of National Staff College and a member of the California Wing.

“We’re not teaching them how, but showing them why things are as they are and how they can effect change,” she added.

“Learning about other personalities we work with really opened things up for us,” said Steppan. “An approach that might get the best response from me could shut another person down cold.”

“This was a tremendous privilege to be able to learn and interact with people who have the same vision, the same goal and the same desire to serve our country,” he said.

The class not only formed strong bonds with like-minded peers from across the country, but also strengthened the students’ boundless enthusiasm for CAP.

“The camaraderie has been terrific,” commented Eggen.

Soto echoed his sentiment: “The experience of working together has been a highlight of the class. We have learned a lot from each other and the instructors.”