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Forging Leaders: Perceptions of Class 19-07's Prior-Enlisted Personnel on Leadership Development at the United States Air Force Officer Training School

December 2024

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Department of Defense Management

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ABSTRACT

This capstone aims to capture the thoughts, feelings, experiences, and perceptions of prior-enlisted members throughout the leadership maturation process at United States Air Force (USAF) Officer Training School (OTS) with the intent to explore, analyze, and identify trends in the USAF OTS leadership development realm. Although studies have explored different aspects of OTS, military leadership, and prior-enlisted personnel separately, a significant gap remains in understanding where these areas converge. Using the case study methodology focused on Class 19-07, the research examines nine prior-enlisted participants from the 24th Training Squadron (24 TRS), providing insights into the largest graduating class in OTS history and its unique integrated training approach. Key findings reveal that while all participants value student leadership positions and networking opportunities, 8 out of 9 participants advocate for a divergent training pathway for prior-enlisted members, and all 9 participants note an over-reliance on prior-enlisted trainees to informally teach non-prior enlisted members. The findings lead to recommendations for modifying program structure, customizing leadership training, standardizing policies across training squadrons, and investigating informal training burdens. Future research opportunities include studying non-prior enlisted members' experiences, expanding participant diversity, and employing multiple data collection methods beyond interviews.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

24 TRS	24th Training Squadron
AA	Academic Assessment
BBP	Bullet Background Paper
BMT	Basic Military Training
BOT	Basic Officer Training
COT	Commissioned Officer Training
COVID	Corona Virus Disease
CR	Contingent Reward
DAF	Department of the Air Force
Det 12	Detachment 12
EMLEX	Emergency Management Leadership Exercise
FRLM	Full Range Leadership Model
HELPS	Homeland Expeditionary Leadership Problem Solving
IR	In-Residence
IRB	Institutional Review Board
LRC	Leadership Reactionary Course
MWR	Morale, Welfare, and Recreation
NPS	Naval Postgraduate School
OTS	Officer Training School
OTS-A	Officer Training School Abbreviated
OTS-ACP	Officer Training School - Accelerated Commissioning Program
MBE	Management by Exception
PCM	Pre-Course Material
PME	Professional Military Education
SLPs	Student Leadership Positions
SPT	Standards and Publication Test
TG1	Theme Group 1
TG2	Theme Group 2
TG3	Theme Group 3
TIS	Time In Service

TFOT	Total Force Officer Training
USAF	United Sates Air Force
USAFA	United States Air Force Academy
USAFROTC	United States Air Force Reserve Officer Training Corps
USSF	United States Space Force
WELPS	Warrior Expeditionary Leadership Problem Solving

I. INTRODUCTION

Leadership has long been the key element for establishing and maintaining air superiority and power while global influence relies on leaders' comprehensive knowledge and tactical prowess. Cultivating these essential leadership qualities requires a dedicated and rigorous educational approach. Officer Training School (OTS) bears the critical mission of shaping future Air Force leaders to embody these high standards and represents one-third of the main commissioning avenues available to members in the United States Air Force (USAF). Because OTS is charged with the enormous task of training the next generation of officers, it is the most elastic accessions pipeline for the mass production of these future leaders (Harrington & Terry, 2016). This elasticity allows OTS to adjust its officer intake in response to fluctuating personnel requirements at an accelerated pace. However, an expeditious assembly line does not necessarily yield effective products. This rapid training approach may potentially impact the depth and breadth of knowledge and skills that officers acquire during their initial education, as compared to more extended or comprehensive training programs. The challenge lies in balancing dynamic leadership development training with compressed time metrics. Although the USAF has proven that strategy-driven leaders yield results, it is debatable if those leadership qualities have been cultivated during their formal military education or as a result of personal ambition fueling self-education and continuous learning (Drew, 1997).

To clarify this latter point, this capstone project aimed to answer the following questions.

1. What are the perceptions of prior enlisted trainees in OTS Class 19-07 regarding their leadership development journey in the program, and how does this compare with their pre-program expectations?

2. Based on OTS Class 19-07 teaching methods and curriculum, in what ways have prior enlisted members refined their leadership skills and how do they believe these experiences prepared them for future leadership roles within the USAF?

3.   How has the integrated training methodology at OTS influenced the leadership skills of prior-enlisted members, and what feedback do they suggest for this approach?

A.   PROBLEM

Although studies have explored different aspects of OTS, military leadership, and prior-enlisted personnel, a significant gap remains in the broad understanding of where these areas converge. Such independent works include academic success predictions, OTS selection methodology, leadership models, and military education (Browne, 2003; Cowan et al., 1990; Drew, 1997; Redaja, 2019; Roberts & Skinner, 1996; Stone, 1994). However, there is an opportunity to capture more data that specifically examines how OTS adjusts its leadership development approach for prior service trainees. Additional research in these areas can provide key information about the perceived relevance and effectiveness of current training methods, the challenges faced by prior-enlisted trainees, and the potential for specialized leadership development techniques that leverage this group's diverse experiences.

Recent studies pertaining to OTS are limited, with much of the existing research becoming increasingly outdated. Three decades ago, Stone (1994) focused on how predictive modeling can help forecast the likelihood of trainee success in the academic achievement aspect. He went on to discover that academic predictors, academic performance, and prior service are all strong indicators of successful completion of OTS. However, significant strides have been made in predictive analytics since this study and academic success factors have likely evolved over this time. Another related research dimension is the OTS selection criteria, which contribute to the broader knowledge base in this field during the end of the 20th century. Cowan et al. (1990) wrote about the causal linkages between the then current OTS selection board process and recommended applicant characteristics such as grade point average, Air Force Officer Qualifying Test (AFOQT) scores, letters of recommendation, etc. Additionally, Roberts and Skinner (1996) noted that only a single study had been conducted to explore the fairness of the AFOQT and its use in selecting candidates for OTS. Despite the publication dates of these studies, these works focus on pre-program aspects and leave a large gap of unstudied domain outcomes throughout and after OTS completion. Moreover, considerable

changes to both the program and personnel have occurred in the last three decades which suggests these studies' conclusions may no longer accurately represent today's environment. Overall, the scarcity of current research about OTS limits researchers' ability to analyze the program; therefore, additional research is required to fully understand the different approaches, challenges, and possibilities within the OTS program.

Although military leadership has been the subject of several studies, it is perceived differently by researchers and the scope of inquiry is broad. Browne (2003) highlighted the importance of the three-dimensional leadership development model and transformational leadership approach, which offers some key insights into critical officer development milestones. Building upon these leadership cultivation concepts, Redaja (2019) noted refined onboarding and customized leadership support programs are also vital to sustaining leadership development over time. Another associated research avenue is how leaders engage with and influence their followers. According to Stafford (2010), the balance between transactional leadership, which offers stability in a routine, goal-driven environment, and transformational leadership, which is the flexible and innovative approach, is key to effective leadership behaviors and follower motivation. However, these two specific approaches may not adequately address the various leadership styles, skills, and experiences of all military members. A complementary research area is dedicated to the analysis of Professional Military Education (PME), which focuses on leadership in military training environments. The traditional USAF PME follows a linear teaching method, which some argue does not fully prepare trainees for potential nonlinear future scenarios or provide tools for success beyond the current environment (Pearse, 2009). Moreover, Pearse (2009) indicated the current PME curriculum structure may potentially hinder innovative approaches due to the rigid protocols in place. This observation about institutional constraints lends to the need to understand cultural shifts, thus balancing tradition with innovation. As noted by Drew (1997, p.42), "the dilemma is that we need to reshape our culture without destroying traditions that have served us well in the past." While some changes have occurred since these findings were published, the argument remains that further adjustments may be needed to develop leaders capable of operating effectively with limited resources.

OTS aims to shape a broad spectrum of trainees, including civilian professionals, prior-enlisted personnel, and high-demand medical specialties, into future leaders, yet the experiences and contributions of prior-enlisted members represent a critical research area that remains underexplored in academic literature. As highlighted in one study, members with prior service bring a unique perspective to the commissioned ranks, possessing military experience and proven leadership skills, often outperforming their non-prior counterparts (Astrella, 1998). Astrella (1998) added that although prior-enlisted officers typically surpass the performance of their non-prior enlisted peers, there is a lack of accelerated promotion recommendations for this sub-class, in addition to a notable disparity in prior-enlisted officer corps gender and ethnic diversity. Moreover, service members who transitioned from enlisted to officer status show higher departure rates post-20-year mark versus career officers, according to Molloy and Fletterich (2013). Workforce depletion continues to be an area of research due to current retention issues across the military. As a result, mitigating talent leakage is a critical area to address, especially given that prior-enlisted members provide invaluable experience, which cannot be replicated nor taught within the confines of a traditional education pathway (Molloy & Fletterich, 2013). Similar to these studies, most research about prior-enlisted officers is focused on forms of retention, attrition, promotion, or diversity but few have captured first-hand experiences of these members in training environments. This is evident in the lack of current studies concerning prior-enlisted officer development from the viewpoint of officer trainees themselves. By focusing on these particular perspectives and experiences, new research may offer valuable information into leadership development practices for prior service members and suggest areas for innovation within the OTS curriculum.

Additional research in this area is important for three key reasons. First, it may provide pivotal discoveries into the effectiveness of the OTS program from the perspective of prior-enlisted trainees, allowing for a more accurate and comprehensive evaluation of how well the program meets their needs. The comparison of pre-program expectations with post-program experiences may identify potential weaknesses, thus allowing for more targeted improvements. Second, studying how prior-enlisted members enhance their leadership skills through the OTS lens offers important data on the program's ability to build upon existing

military experience. Without this knowledge, it is difficult to ensure that future curriculum developments effectively prepare these members for their future roles, while capitalizing on their prior knowledge. Lastly, examining the impact of the integrated training methodology on leadership skills advancement creates a space not only to evaluate but potentially improve OTS's approach to combining diverse groups. The feedback from prior-enlisted members on this integrated approach can lead to more effective training strategies that benefit not only this specific group but all trainees in this program, ultimately strengthening leadership capabilities across the force.

B.   PURPOSE

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore the challenges in, and possible process improvements to, the leadership development process at OTS for prior-enlisted members based on the unprecedented size of class 19-07, which occurred from 30 July to 27 September 2019. This singular experience, consisting of 800 officer trainees, stretched OTS facilities and faculty to maximum capacity but successfully met the demand gap produced by ROTC and USAFA, as identified by Air Force Manpower Directorate and Air Force Recruiting Service (Losey, 2019). While this exceptional class demonstrated the program's ability to scale, it also highlighted potential areas for refinement in the leadership development process, particularly for prior-enlisted members. Given the massive differential in leadership maturity and diversified profiles, OTS curriculum addresses leadership training from a singular baseline concept (Welty, 2018). However, developments in this research gap can potentially help advance military education policies and Air Force leadership doctrine to truly stimulate the leadership qualities, characteristics, and styles needed for the future fight.

C.   SCOPE, FOCUS, AND LIMITATIONS

The scope of this study involves prior-enlisted members who completed OTS during the period of 30 July to 27 September 2019, designated as class 19-07. This was the largest class to graduate from OTS in the history of Air University and as a result was known as the "Godzilla" class (Losey, 2019). Additionally, the term Total Force Officer Training (TFOT) was introduced during this class to categorize all personnel going through OTS, which combined Basic Officer Training (BOT) and Commissioned Officer Training (COT) into an

integrated training pipeline. Although the processual change to TFOT is not the core concentration of the study, this terminology will be discussed more in the next chapter to highlight key aspects. Furthermore, the primary focus of this study is to capture the thoughts, attitudes, perceptions, and experiences of those prior-enlisted members during the aforementioned timeframe, particularly in regard to leadership growth and development. Unlike other OTS trainees, prior-enlisted members enter the program with an established military background and operational leadership experience. This dual-sided point of view - from both enlisted and now as an officer - lends to the rationale for documenting this unique research opportunity.

This study faced several important limitations and should be considered. One such limitation is the number of members available and willing to participate in these interviews. Also, to note, these are the experiences of members pre-pandemic. This variance may alter the research value to post-COVID OTS candidates, leaders, and policy makers, as the training environment has since undergone significant changes. The pandemic required adaptations in training methods, including increased use of virtual learning platforms, modified physical training protocols, and new health and safety measures. These shifts have likely reshaped the OTS experience, potentially affecting leadership development approaches and trainee interactions. Nevertheless, the experiences of those who have completed OTS during this historical period still provide added value to effectively utilize the time and resources allocated to OTS and its officer trainees. Finally, over the last several years OTS has evolved to include changes in the staff teaching framework, upper- and lower-class trainee delineators, among others, and has become the proving ground for the United States Space Force (USSF) officer trainees (Roza, 2023). Although these are the current processes and parameters, these changes remain outside the scope of this research. Further limitations specific to the data collection process are detailed in the data analysis section of this study.

D.   STUDY BENEFITS

This study offers several benefits, which aims at addressing the gaps in this research area. First, the potential for a tailored leadership development curriculum for prior-enlisted members cultivates various leadership styles in a standardized manner that produces next

generation leaders with agile decision-making capabilities required given the rapid military domain changes. The deviation from traditional PME can potentially affect the program's efficiency and effectiveness in terms of developing various skill levels without catering to lower levels or stifling the progress of more advanced members. Second, examining the group dynamics of an integrated training environment can expand existing knowledge in how prior-enlisted officer trainees navigate their leadership transformation journey, potentially leading to new discoveries into the second- and third-order effects of this approach. Third, capturing the lived experiences of prior-enlisted members during this unique event adds contextual details to the historical record. This alternate viewpoint provides lessons learned that could inform future research ventures about large-scale officer development operations and their corresponding output optimization.

Overall, this study encourages a robust review and appropriation of limited resources, to include time and space constraints for both members and the institution. Several program advancements have stemmed from emergent leaders with unconventional perspectives and the continued study of such instances. The potential impact of these diverse viewpoints on military innovation is a modern-day topic with continued discussions among top military leaders and strategists (RAND, n.d.). Although maintaining long-term changes can be challenging in process improvement efforts, sustaining these efforts may yield significant results in the USAF's operational readiness, mission effectiveness, and overall force development.

E. SUMMARY

This chapter was the introduction to this case study. The problem was defined, and the purpose was outlined in detail. To ensure this study's boundaries were transparent, the scope, focus, and limitations were annotated. Finally, the benefits were captured and highlighted the potential impacts of these findings. In summary, these categories lay the foundational context for the following chapters.

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II.   BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter provides essential context and theoretical foundations for this study. The OTS background section is divided into seven components that give a detailed preface about the intricacies and foundational concepts of the program. Additionally, the related literature is reviewed, with particular attention given to Air Force leadership philosophy and the OTS strategy.

A.   BACKGROUND

OTS is a vital Air Force institution that prepares civilian and enlisted candidates to become commissioned officers through rigorous academic and leadership training. The program's diverse student composition, including both prior-enlisted and civilian trainees, creates a unique training environment that leverages student leadership positions (SLPs) and structured curricula to develop effective military leaders, as demonstrated during periods of high-volume training such as the notable "Godzilla" class, which showcased the school's adaptability and effectiveness in meeting the Air Force's officer production requirements.

1.   Officer Training School

a.   *History*

OTS was created in 1959 at the Medina Annex, Lackland Air Force Base, Texas, to meet the growing need for more commissioned officers during the Cold War (U.S. Air Force, 2023). At the time, the Air Force mainly relied on the United States Air Force Academy (USAFA) and United States Air Force Reserve Officer Training Corps (USAFROTC) programs to commission officers, but the rapidly expanding force required another path. OTS was designed to take civilians, college graduates, and enlisted personnel through a fast-paced training program, preparing them to lead as Air Force officers. Originally, it was a twelve-week course that provided a mix of military training, leadership development, and academic instruction to shape individuals into capable officers in a short

amount of time (Blankenship, 2012). Since then, its duration has fluctuated in length, with the current timeline being nine weeks (U.S. Air Force, n.d.).

Since its founding, OTS has relocated to Maxwell Air Force Base in Alabama and has continually adapted to the needs of the Air Force. Its mission is to "develop warrior-minded leaders of character committed to our oath, values and creed" (Air University, n.d.). Over time, OTS has evolved to not only align with the Department of the Air Forces (DAF) strategic priorities to create a diverse talent pool but also to incorporate innovative technologies (Berglund et al., 2023). Its elasticity and commitment to excellence have ensured that it continues to play a key role in developing the future leaders of the USAF.

b.   *Purpose and Goals*

Overall, "the purpose of OTS is to train and develop new officers to fulfill Air Force and Space Force active duty, Reserve and Air National Guard requirements, in partnership with the U.S. Air Force Academy and Air Force Reserve Officer Training Corps. Accession numbers fluctuate in response to variations between projected and actual U.S. Air Force Academy and Air Force ROTC officer accessions and Air Force and Space Force end strength requirements" (U.S. Air Force, 2023, para. 5). While instilling the Air Force core values of Integrity First, Service Before Self, and Excellence in All We Do, OTS transforms trainees' leadership potential into effective, mission-ready officers (U.S. Air Force, 2012). This goal of producing highly skilled military leaders is achieved through a series of mental and physical challenges, ensuring trainees are proficient in technical knowledge and capable of performing in high-stress environments. In conjunction with several other regulations, the Officer Training School Manual (OTSMAN) 36-2604 served as the standardized guidance for trainees and staff members to ensure a uniform training approach (Department of the Air Force [DAF], 2023). To this day, OTS remains the USAF's primary source for commissioning officers. Although USAFA and AFROTC are important pathways as well, they are outside the scope of this study and will not be discussed further.

c. *Structure - Full/Abbreviated Courses and Integrated Training*

Total Force Officer Training (TFOT) "is open to all civilian applicants to include AF Reserve, Guard, Sister Service members, and AF active-duty Airmen wishing to pursue an opportunity to become a commissioned officer in the Air Force by attending OTS" (U.S. Air Force, 2012, p. 65). Previously known as Basic Officer Training (BOT), TFOT was coined as the new terminology to embrace the totality of all trainee variants within the pipeline. This group consists of non-line officers, further sub-categorized as rated and non-rated, which represents the majority of officers in the USAF.

Commissioned Officer Training (COT) "provides initial officership and leadership development education to direct-commissioned medical, legal, and chaplain services officers for the USAF" (U.S. Air Force, 2012, p. 85). Traditionally five weeks long, COT aims to provide a foundational level of military discipline and professionalism to line officers in a condensed timeline. As the program has evolved, so too has the name. Previously known as COT, the new term of Officer Training School Abbreviated (OTS-A) came about after a significant restructuring of the then-current training program. "The course is designed for specific medical professionals from all Air Force components, including Active Duty, Air National Guard, Air Force Reserve, Health Professional Scholarship Program, and Uniformed Services University of Health Sciences. The program is 32 training days and is strategically designed to graduate these officers with basic level of the foundational competencies" (Officer Training School, 2024b, p. 5). This training route occurs at various times during the year and runs parallel to TFOT courses.

The Officer Training School-Accelerate Commissioning Program (OTS-ACP) was another condensed pipeline that was in the beta testing phase during this period. "Candidates for OTS-ACP were selected from the pool of OTS selects using the present OTS application process. The AFRS then searched from within those that applied for master sergeants and above that had completed Senior Noncommissioned Officer Academy either by correspondence or in-residence" (Guest, 2019, para. 10). Although a follow-on beta test was scheduled for October 2019, it was cancelled, and the program has not been offered since.

The integrated training approach came from merging the line and non-line training pipelines together, thus resulting in a combined eight-week course. Class 19-07 was the only course of this size, in the initial FY19 series of eight, that experienced this restructuring first-hand (Neimi, 2019). Initially introduced in early 2019, the purpose of this action was to allow trainees greater interaction with each other that otherwise would not occur with separate training channels. Additionally, the reform consolidated three training squadrons into two for processing efficiency and quality purposes (Welty, 2018). Welty (2018, para. 4) continued that "the initiative increases officer production capacity from around 2,700 graduates annually to 3,300 with a surge capability of up to 3,800." However, trainees' experiences within the two squadrons varied. These variances resulted from staff and cadet leadership, as well as curriculum taught within Detachment 12 (Det 12) and 24 Training Squadron (24 TRS) (Airforceotsguy, 2018). Moreover, a random selection of COT members completed a five-week course and departed OTS prematurely, while the remainder completed the full eight-week track. For clarification, the eight-week course is henceforth annotated as OTS and the five-week course is annotated is OTS-A.

d.   Curricula - Pre-Course Material and In-Residence Lessons

The pre-course material (PCM) served as the introduction to military fundamentals and USAF-specific content. This 30-hour distance learning setting combined multiple delivery formats to include Student Reader, Web-Based Training, Internet Based Research, and Video (Officer Training School, n.d.c). Although it was a refresher course for prior-enlisted personnel, non-prior enlisted members used this as the basis for transitioning from the civilian sector to the military environment. Additionally, the PCM was not meant to be an all-inclusive phase of the program. This portion of the curriculum prepared trainees for the arduous, in-residence (IR) component and ensured they comprehended the key topics, terminology, and expectations. Table 1 summarizes the PCM content. Note that an introduction to the Full-Range Leadership Model (FRLM) is missing from this list, a key concept discussed later in depth.

Table 1.   Pre-Course Material. Source: Officer Training School (n.d.c).

Effective Communication	Preparing to Communicate Listening: The Neglected Skill
Values	The Profession of Arms Air Force Core Values Customs and Courtesies Dress and Appearance Standards The Honor Code The Commission and Oath of Office Public Affairs and the Media
Air Force Leadership	Air Force Leader Development Introduction to Leadership Motivation Continuous Process Improvement Change Management Managing Air Force Resources
Building Teams	Followership Conflict Management
Culture and Diversity	Air Force Equal Opportunity Program Sexual Harassment Awareness
Military Studies	War and the U.S. Military Airpower through WWI Air Force Operations USAF Major Commands Principles of War and Tenets of Airpower Air and Space Expeditionary Force Department of the Air Force Terrorism Nuclear Operations Airpower: End of WWI through WWII Airpower through the Cold War Part I Airpower through the Cold War Part II Airpower in the Post-Cold War Airpower in the 21st Century
Supervisor Responsibilities	Stress Management and Resiliency Civilian Personnel Pay, Allowances, and Leave Risk Management Counseling Mentoring Effective Supervision

Military Law	Civilian Control of the Military
	Law of Armed Conflict
	The Code of Conduct
	Leadership, Authority, and Responsibility
	Sexual Assault Prevention and Response
	Substance Abuse Control Program
	The Inspector General System
	Joint Ethics
The Enlisted Force	The Enlisted Force
Joint Service Awareness	The Department of Defense
	Sister Services
	Joint Operations
	Combatant Commands
	The Total Force
	Defense Support of Civil Authorities
	Cyber Security

The IR material was more comprehensive in nature and aimed at building upon the foundational concepts taught in the PCM. This timeframe provided a space for trainees to apply their leadership skills in a variety of graded and non-graded simulated events, as well as classroom lectures in an academic environment. Table 2 details the lessons taught to each group (i.e. OTS and OTS-A). Bold text references testable material and was a graduation requirement. The asterisks denote which topics were covered on academic assessment (AA) one (single asterisk) or AA two (double asterisk). Note that less than half the material taught for both groups (i.e. OTS and OTS-A) was considered testable material and only one lesson about the FRLM transpired.

Table 2.   Lesson Schedule for OTS and OTS-A. Source: Officer Training School (n.d.b).

Date	Lesson	OTS	OTS-A
2 Aug	Academic Orientation	X	X
2 Aug	**Air Force Leader Development***	X	X
5 Aug	**Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Program***	X	X
5 Aug	**Suicide Prevention***	X	X
5 Aug	**Religious Accommodation***	X	X
6 Aug	**Air Force Core Values***	X	X
6 Aug	**Team Building***	X	X
7 Aug	**Problem Solving***	X	X
8 Aug	**Change Management***	X	X
9 Aug	**Followership***	X	X
9 Aug	**Conflict Management***	X	X
12 Aug	**Full Range Leadership****	X	X
13 Aug	**Cyberspace****	X	X
13 Aug	**National Security Strategy****	X	X
13 Aug	**Military Justice ****	X	X
13 Aug	Military Justice Case Studies	X	X
13 Aug	**Professional and Unprofessional Relationships****	X	X
13 Aug	Professional and Unprofessional Relationships Case Studies	X	X
14 Aug	**Leading Diverse Organizations****	X	X
14 Aug	**Cross Cultural Competence****	X	X
14 Aug	Cultural VEST	X	X
14 Aug	**Counseling and Practicum****	X	X
15/16 Aug	Airmanship	X	X
20 Aug	Capabilities and Force Packaging	X	X
21 Aug	Values Exercise	X	X
22 Aug	Non-Commissioned Officer (NCO) Perspective	X	X
23 Aug	Army/Navy/USMC Panel	X	X
23 Aug	Air Force Evaluation Systems	X	X
OTS-A Lessons			
26 Aug	Workplace Negotiations		X
26 Aug	Mentorship		X
26 Aug	Organizational Climate		X
26 Aug	Establishing Expectations		X
26 Aug	Bias		X
27 Aug	Ethical Decision Making I		X
27 Aug	Ethical Decision Making II		X
27 Aug	Self-Awareness		X

Date	Lesson	OTS	OTS-A
28 Aug	Green Dot		X
28 Aug	Standards and Accountability		X
29 Aug	Professionalism is a Decision		X
29 Aug	Capstone Round Table		X
	OTS Lessons		
26 Aug	Managing Competing Priorities	X	
7 Sept	Virtual Staff Ride	X	
9 Sept	Organizational Climate	X	
9 Sept	Establishing Expectations	X	
9 Sept	Blended Retirement System	X	
9 Sept	Bias	X	
9 Sept	Bullet Practicum - Evaluation	X	
9 Sept	Workplace Negotiations	X	
10 Sept	Standards and Accountability	X	
10 Sept	Ethical Decision Making I	X	
10 Sept	Career Progression	X	
10 Sept	Self-Awareness	X	
10 Sept	Ethical Decision Making II	X	
11 Sept	Bullet Practicum - Writing	X	
12 Sept	Professionalism is a Decision	X	
12 Sept	Senior Non-Commissioned Officer (SNCO) Perspective	X	
12 Sept	Green Dot	X	
23 Sept	Capstone Round Table	X	

Bold text references testable material and was a graduation requirement. The asterisks denote which topics were covered on academic assessment (AA) one (single asterisk) or AA two (double asterisk).

In addition, several academic milestones were also required for graduation. Students must achieve a mean score of 80% between both AAs or a minimum score of 80% on the Cumulative AA if the previous standard was not met (Officer Training School, n.d.b). Table 3 outlines the assessments and Table 4 delineates the major assignments. For clarification, SPT denotes Standards and Publication Test. Note that the FRLM assignment in Table 4 was not a graduation requirement, despite the FRLM being a core function of the curriculum and a testable topic (see Table 2).

Table 3.   Assessments. Source: Officer Training School (n.d.b).

Date	Assessment	Location
6 Aug	SPT #1	Flight Rooms
12 Aug	***Academic Assessment (AA) 1**	**Polifka Auditorium**
19 Aug	***AA 2**	**Polifka Auditorium**
4-6 Sept	SPT #2 (rotational)	Flight Rooms
26 Aug	Cumulative AA	Hoover Auditorium

Bold text references testable material and was a graduation requirement. The asterisks denote which topics were covered on academic assessment (AA) one (single asterisk) or AA two (double asterisk).

Table 4.   Major Assignments. Source: Officer Training School (n.d.b)

Due Date	Time	Assignment	Description	Submit via…
2 Aug	*0630*	*Mini-Paper Expectations*	*Q&A for Mini-Paper*	*No assignment due*
3 Aug	2000	Mini-Paper - Talking Paper	½ - 1 page	Canvas
7 Aug	*1410*	*Paper #1 Expectations*	*Q&A for Paper #1*	*No assignment due*
10 Aug	**2000**	***Paper #1 due - Talking Paper (OTS-A graduation requirement)**	**1 page info paper**	**Canvas**
12 Aug	1300	Full-Range Leadership Model Assignment - see SR	Brief 8 FRLM behaviors	Present during lesson
12 Aug	*0700*	*Briefing #1 Expectations*	*Q&A for Briefing #1*	*No assignment due*
13 Aug	*1410*	*Paper #2 Expectations*	*Q&A for Paper #2*	*No assignment due*
20 Aug	**0900**	***Briefing #1 due - Informative Brief (OTS-A graduation requirement)**	**5-9 minutes**	**Present in Flt Rm**
21 Aug	**2000**	***Paper #2 due - Bullet Background Paper (BBP) (OTS graduation requirement)**	**1 page advocacy paper**	**Canvas**
25 Aug	2000	Complete Personality Profile (OTS-A)	Online quiz 16personalities.com	Bring to Character Week classes
28 Aug	**0800**	***Briefing #2 - Advocacy Brief (OTS graduation requirement)**	**5-9 minutes**	**Present in Flt Rm**
8 Sept	2000	Complete Personality Profile (OTS)	Online quiz 16 personalities.com	Compile results email to instructor
9 Sept	2000	Bullet Practicum: Writing Assignment (OTS)	Complete writing assignment per SR	Email to Instructor
21 Aug	2000	Decision Brief Expectations	Q&A for Decision Brief	No assignment due
25 Aug	2000	Decision Brief Milestone #1	Submit topics	Email to Instructor
1 Sept	2000	Decision Brief Milestone #2	Submit draft of BBP	Email to Instructor

Due Date	Time	Assignment	Description	Submit via…
8 Sept	2000	Decision Brief Milestone #3	Brief Flt for feedback	Notify Instructor of completion
10 Sept	1410	Decision Brief Final Out-Brief (Instructor)	10-15 minute brief	Email to Instructor

Bold text references testable material and was a graduation requirement. The asterisks denote which topics were covered on academic assessment (AA) one (single asterisk) or AA two (double asterisk).

e.   *Student Leadership Positions*

SLPs entailed the assignment of a specific role to a student and the subsequent performance evaluation of that role by the designated staff advisor. Given the substantial class size and number of positions available, SLP appointments were issued by OTS staff members and generally rotated weekly among students. Similar to the SLPs in BMT and USAF technical training, the purpose was to provide trainees with an opportunity to demonstrate their leadership skills within the context of a specific role to gain insight into their leadership competencies and areas of improvement in preparation for their future leadership roles (Lummus, 2024). Additionally, each trainee was mandated to complete and achieve a passing score for two SLPs in order to graduate. One of the recurring SLPs is the flight leader position. This trainee is responsible for managing and guiding their respective flight, typically twelve personnel on average, ensuring accountability, maintaining standards, and delegating tasks effectively (Officer Training School, 2024a). This role involves serving as a liaison between instructors and flight members, as well as executing various administrative and leadership duties. Additional SLP opportunities fell under several categories in the student wing structure. Generally, these positions oversaw a larger group of trainees, which aligns with the traditional Air Force wing, group, squadron, and flight structures. Figure 1 charts the student wing structure in detail, which is a sanitized version to protect the identities of the individuals that fulfilled those roles. For clarification, the following acronyms are expanded: Homeland/Warrior Expeditionary Leadership Problem Solving (HELPS/WELPS); Leadership Reactionary Course (LRC); Emergency Management Leadership Exercise (EMLEX); Morale, Welfare, and Recreation (MWR).
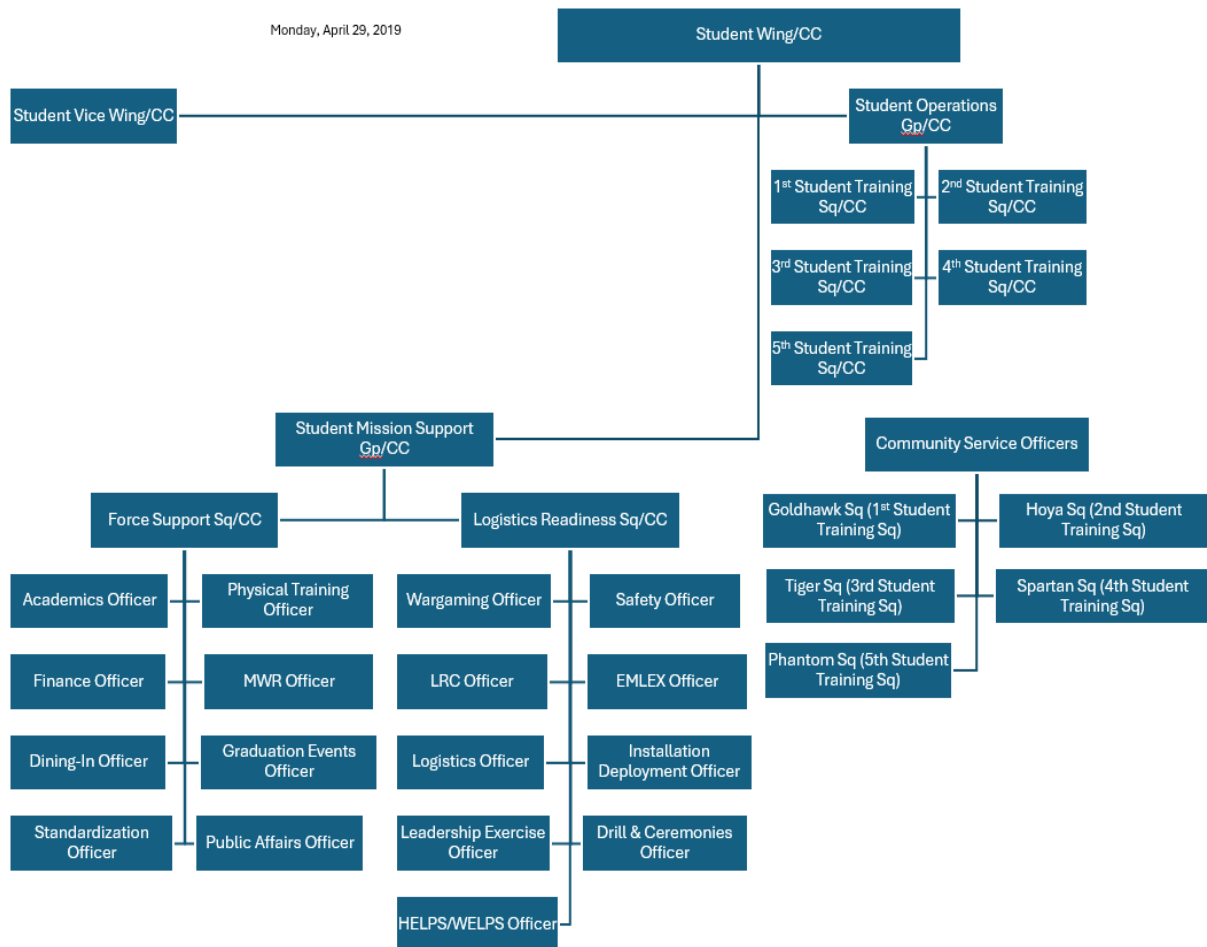
Figure 1.   Student Wing Structure. Source: 24 TRS (PowerPoint slide, April 29, 2019).

f.   *Student Composition*

Underneath the category of TFOT and COT, two additional sub-groups reside which are prior-service and non-prior enlisted members. Prior-service members are a unique asset to the USAF in that these members already have military experience and demonstrated leadership capabilities but acquired both at a different level. Typically, more vested in long-term careers than their non-prior peers, prior-enlisted members provide invaluable experience, which can neither be replicated nor taught within the confines of a traditional education pathway (Molloy & Fletterich, 2013). Although primarily Air Force in nature, some OTS prior-enlisted come from other branches of service. These members provide an additional perspective in terms of other military leadership models. This

diversity of experience enhances the overall leadership development at OTS, fostering a more comprehensive understanding of joint operations and varied military cultures. Over the course of several weeks, OTS aims to reshape these members into leaders at more strategic levels with wider impacts across the force. On the other hand, non-prior members are officer trainees from the civilian sector with no prior military experience. Although these members have civilian leadership skills, they lack the foundational wisdom in military leadership that their counterparts enter training with. Additionally, non-prior trainees must rapidly acquire a broad knowledge base in the eight-week period, as well as simultaneously acclimate to the military lifestyle. Although processing the substantial volume of information is achievable, these individuals may benefit from supplementary support throughout the program. Overall, the intent is to mold these non-prior individuals into refined military leaders in a short period of time. As noted by Molloy and Fletterich (2013), the distinction between prior-service and non-prior enlisted members is important given the learning curve for leadership development varies greatly between the two. Nevertheless, both are critical assets when developing a lethal force.

g. Significance of the "Godzilla" Class

Class 19-07, nicknamed the "Godzilla" class, was a monumental undertaking for all personnel involved since this student capacity had never occurred in the history of Air University. Starting with a size of 800 trainees, 149 of which completed the abbreviated five-week program, OTS' infrastructure was pushed to its limits, thus causing the program to embrace innovative solutions and flexible training techniques (Drawdy, 2019). Although infrastructure challenges were anticipated by the OTS team, trainees faced difficulties in purchasing uniforms and related supplies due to inventory shortages, as the supply chain was unprepared for the large influx of students (Culbert, 2019). Furthermore, the allotted meal in the initial weeks per flight was often reduced due to the dining facilities' inability to process such a high volume of trainees simultaneously. However, temporary changes in uniform policies, along with shared dining facility space with the ROTC cohorts, allowed OTS to overcome these challenges. Moreover, several lectures were relocated from traditional classrooms to larger auditoriums to accommodate the class size as well (Oprihory, 2019b). This massive undertaking demonstrated the USAF's commitment to

producing leaders on demand to meet global challenges and personnel requirements. According to Harrington and Terry (2016), OTS' ability to increase and decrease surge capacity in a short period makes it the most flexible officer accession source, as compared to the USAFA and AFROTC. All in all, the successful completion of Class 19-07 illustrated the robustness and resiliency of this training program.

B. LITERATURE REVIEW

The Air Force has developed its leadership philosophy through decades of doctrine refinement and a structured approach to developing leaders at various levels throughout their careers. At OTS, this philosophy is put into practice through strategic guidance from the commandant and the full-range leadership model, which focuses on creating lasting changes in how trainees think and act as military leaders.

1. Air Force Leadership Philosophy

a. Historical Doctrine

The Air Force leadership philosophy has deep roots in its historical doctrine, shaped by the need to develop leaders capable of adapting to both peacetime and combat challenges. Traditionally, leadership has been defined through mission and people, stressing the importance of development at the tactical, operational, and strategic levels (Air Force Doctrine Document [AFDD], 2006). Additionally, Air Force doctrine promoted a balance between strict military discipline and the need for independent thought, especially in an operational environment where swift, calculated action could make the difference between mission success and failure. However, in today's culture guided by the "do more with less" motto and increased mission demands, leadership has shifted to that of resource steward and gatekeeper. This attempt to produce the same outputs with increasing flexibility in organizational inputs puts a fatalistic strain on long-term strategy objectives and is unsustainable for the Air Force (Sanchez, 2007). Moreover, the increasing pattern of high attrition supports this lack of sustainability and an exponential decrease in human capital. This trend suggests that the Air Force is not only losing personnel at an alarming rate but also experiencing a compounding loss of skills, experience, and institutional knowledge, which can significantly impact operational readiness and mission

effectiveness. Canpolat and Gültekin (2010) wrote that the elevated turnover should be a primary focus of policy makers future decisions, given this current trend squanders training investments and degrades operational efficiency.

Overall, Air Force leadership curriculums are designed around core USAF leadership principles and doctrine, as well as the force development levels (AFDD, 2006). This grounding in tradition provides officers with a robust framework for understanding the Air Force's heritage, values, and strategic vision. It enables them to make informed decisions aligned with Air Force culture and objectives, while also fostering the critical thinking skills necessary to adapt these principles to systemic operational environments and challenges.

b.   Levels of Force Development

Force development focuses on achieving specific goals by enhancing the professional and technical skills of Airmen. The key to success is knowing the right approach for each part of this goal and being able to create harmony between the different parts that contribute to overall capabilities. These efforts take place at the tactical, operational, and strategic levels, meaning they impact actions on the ground, broader missions, and long-term objectives (AFDD, 2006).

As seen in Figure 2, the relationship between the tactical, operational, and strategic levels necessitates varying degrees of leadership competencies (AFDD, 2006). At the tactical level, leaders are focused on day-to-day operations while assimilating to Air Force culture. This period is one of self-discovery in terms of leadership styles and external influence, which calls for interpersonal skills for a task-driven environment. Moreover, the ethical and moral standards of a leader set the foundation for unit integrity, mission success, and enduring organizational excellence. As a leader's area of responsibility grows, particularly in authority and scope, they transition to a broader perspective at the operational level. This level zeros in on team dynamics, while continuing to build upon that leader's personal skillset. Additionally, a blend of competencies resulting from varied assignment experiences lends to a leader's ability to succeed at this level. The third and final echelon is the strategic level. Senior leaders must apply 'big picture' organizational

competencies to exceptionally complex and multi-tiered organizations while effectively leading Airman across in both the Air Force and joint settings (AFDD, 2006). In order to remain competitive within the shifting dynamic of world powers, Air Force leaders must be developed along the responsibility continuum to gain additional educational knowledge, training, and experiences required for leaders of the future fight (Air Force Leader Development, PowerPoint slides, n.d.).
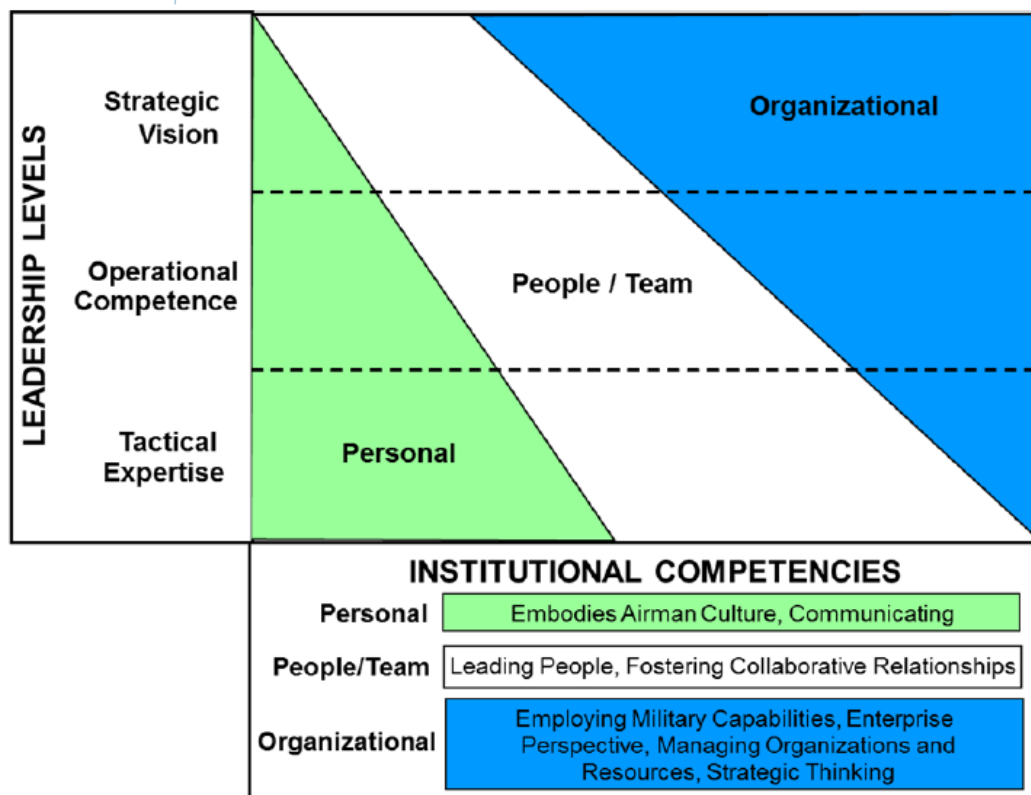
Figure 2.   Relationship of Leadership Levels with Leadership Competencies.
Source: Air Force Leader Development (PowerPoint slides, n.d.).

2.   Officer Training School Strategy

a.   *Commandant's Direction*

In 2019, the Commandant of OTS was then Colonel Peter G. Bailey, now Brigadier General Bailey. As the Commandant, Col Bailey was responsible for overseeing the training and development of officer trainees and focused on the "force multiplier" concept,

a priority of the then Chief of Staff of the USAF, General David L. Goldfien (Oprihory, 2019a). Due to the size and scheduling challenge associated with the integrated training classes, emphasis was placed on flexibility in schedule, where applicable, and innovation solutions were encouraged among staff to maximize OTS' facilities and resources. Col Bailey insisted the standards of good order and discipline took precedence in all decision-making processes without compromising the quality of the training environment (Oprihory, 2019b). Overall, he played an integral role in leading the program through several major organizational changes to meet the rapidly changing needs of the Air Force and fostered an environment of shared purpose among all.

b.   Full-Range Leadership Model

The FRLM serves as the foundational leadership framework for OTS trainees. However, the evolution of leadership theories changes as additional research reshapes various hypotheses and generates modern adaptations. Early leadership concepts focused on the Great Man and traits theories to explain the rarity of leaders with innate qualities who influenced some of the most prolific events in history (Benmira & Agboola, 2021). As time passed, philosophers moved away from a natural occurrence to behavioral and situational-based theories. The behavioral leadership theory was influenced by pioneers in this field such as Kurt Lewin, Ralph Stogdill, and Rensis Likert. This theory approaches leadership from the perspective of distinct, categorical behaviors based on numerous leadership styles (Stoker et al., 2023). Additionally, the Situational Leadership Model (SLM) was developed by Paul Hersey and Kenneth Blanchard, which outlines when to utilize the directing, coaching, supporting, and delegating leadership styles based on followers' abilities and willingness to conform (CFI Team, n.d.). In the modern era, transactional and transformational leadership are widely accepted paradigms that lead into the FRLM.

The FRLM consists of a mix of Laissez-Faire, Transactional, and Transformational leadership styles. The most hands-off approach, Laissez-Faire is considered an absence of leadership that fails to develop followers and should be avoided (Officer Training School, n.d.a). However, it embraces the autonomous nature of delegation and minimalistic

supervision, which has some positive connotations. Additionally, the transactional style is further sub-categorized in the passive and active Management by Exception (MBE) and Contingent Reward (CR) classifications. MBE is a corrective action approach and focuses on compliance, while CR utilizes the longstanding method of extrinsic motivational factors to generate the target goal. Although the most rewarding leadership styles come from intrinsic motivational factors, CR and MBE are essential to achieve mission accomplishment. However, the preferred method comes from empirically proven studies, resulting in the "most effective form of leadership at the organizational levels" (Officer Training School, n.d.a, p. 8). Transformational leadership incorporates individualized consideration, intellectual stimulation, inspirational motivation, and idealized influence behaviors. Individualized consideration is the caring aspect of leadership that embraces active listening skills and the military duty of mentor, facilitator, and advisor. On the other hand, intellectual stimulation is required to foster an innovative environment of creative thinking and risk tolerance. Moreover, inspirational motivation leverages follower's intrinsic values to unite the group around a unified vision with a strong sense of purpose. Additionally, idealized influence is the charismatic, role model aspect to transformational leadership. Each of the three styles of leadership is effective depending on the context. Trainees must be cognizant of situationally specific demands, their team members' needs, and motivational aspects that will yield their desired outcomes. Figure 3 provides a visual representation of the FRLM.
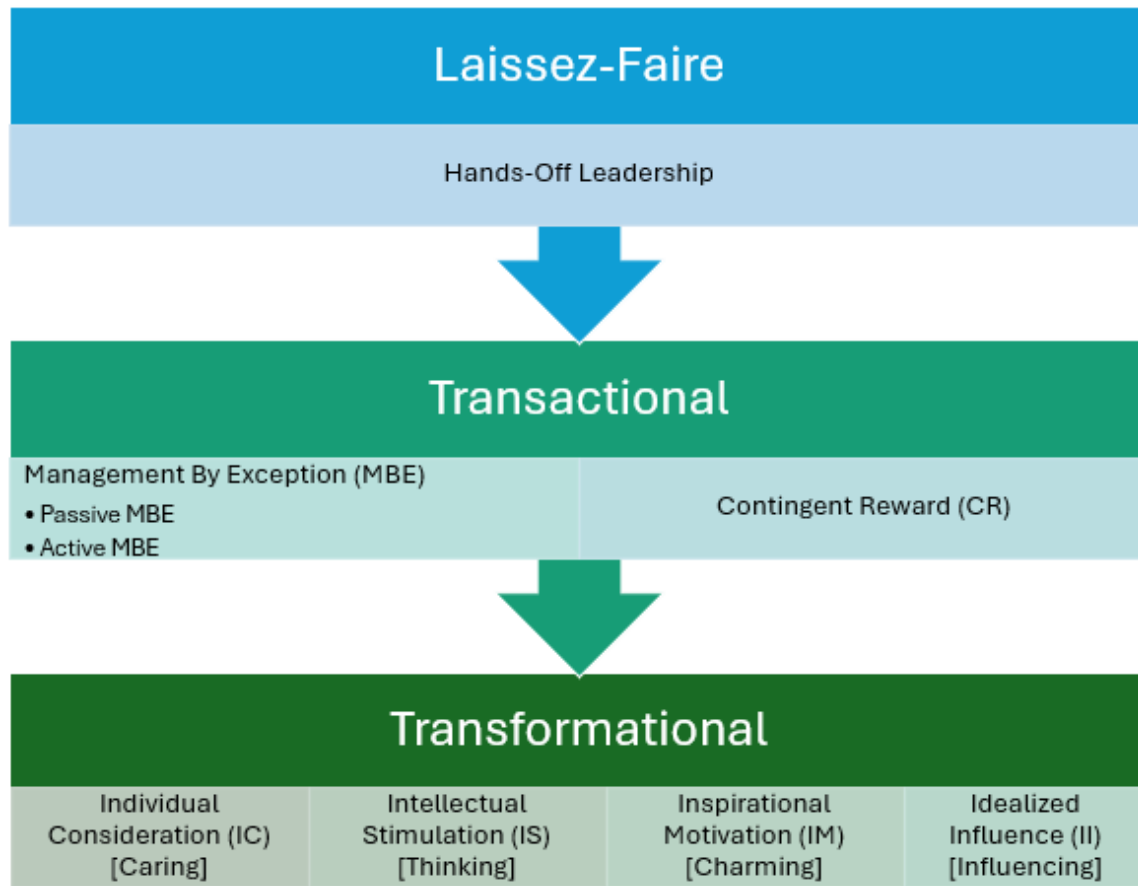
Figure 3.   FRLM. Adapted from Officer Training School (n.d.a.).

c.   *Transformation Sustainment*

Sustaining change is a critical and difficult task with any organizational transformation. A long-term endeavor, OTS introduces a variety of tools and instills an endless feedback mindset in trainees to encourage self-reflection. Using a combination of classroom instruction, practical exercises, and mentorship, trainees internalize the leadership principles taught and synthesize ways to implement these theoretical models into real-world scenarios. Furthermore, OTS ingrains these lessons into enduring professional practices which allow for leadership refinement over the course of each trainee's career. Thirtle (2001) opined that maintaining a quality force with innate leadership abilities is achieved through educational prowess and capitalizing on quality improvement opportunities. Overall, OTS is a channel for leadership optimization through a myriad of instruction and experiences.

C.   SUMMARY

This chapter provided the background and literature pertinent to OTS and this case study. Given the backdrop of OTS, it began with an explanation of a series of subsections, which include the history, purpose and goals, structure, curricula, student leadership positions, student composition, and the significance of the "Godzilla" class. Next, the chapter transitioned to a comprehensive review of relevant literature, focusing on the Air Force leadership philosophy and OTS strategy. The historical doctrine and levels of force development provided the supporting context for the Air Force leadership philosophy, while the Commandant's direction, FRLM, and transformation sustainment highlighted the key aspects of the OTS strategy.

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III. METHODOLOGY

This chapter outlines the methodology used to complete this case study. Key terminology is defined, and the process of interview question generation is established. The selection of study participants is annotated and the analytical approach with limitations and assumptions are bounded. Due to the exploratory nature of this research study, the methodology outlined provides the best framework for this study.

A. CASE STUDY APPROACH

A single-case study is most appropriate for a singular event or subject within a bounded system in order to gain an in-depth understanding of that specific instance. More specifically, an intrinsic case study approach is utilized when researching a significant, unique situation and is a valuable research method for qualitative studies to allow for multi-faceted explorations (Crowe et al., 2011). However, due to the limited scope, findings are highly contextual and may not be generalizable, thus resulting in what some scholars presume as a less rigorous form of research methodology (Yin, 2009). Nevertheless, this highly popular approach can "provide a nuanced, empirically-rich, holistic account of a specific phenomena" (Willis, 2014, para. 14). Given the exploratory nature of this study and the unique occurrence in 2019, class 19-07 is a prime scenario for the intrinsic case study approach.

B. POPULATION PARAMETERS

To ensure uniform interpretation of key definitions in the sampling structure, the researcher has outlined the population, target population, and sample group terminology. The population is defined as all prior-enlisted members who graduated from OTS. The target population is a sub-set of the population. This includes all prior-enlisted members who graduated from OTS class 19-07, which occurred during the period of 30 July through 27 September 2019. The sample group is a sub-set of the target population. A random selection of prior-enlisted members, within the Goldhawk Squadron of approximately 80 trainees, includes varied sub-categories such as military service status, years of service, Air Force Specialty Code (AFSC), etc. Although a member of the OTS class in this study, the

researcher maintained neutrality throughout the research process to uphold research accuracy and integrity.

C.   INTERVIEW QUESTION GENERATION

The interview questions were generated by the researcher in three key areas: background/general, program (OTS), and other. The background and general information questions focused on current military status (e.g., active duty, guard, reserve, separated, medically retired, other), pre-OTS and current branch of service, number of years served, highest level of education achieved pre- and post-OTS, commissioning motivation, and leadership roles held prior to OTS. Additionally, the program (OTS) questions consisted of the interviewee's overall experience at OTS, comparison of OTS and other professional military education (PME) programs, pre-program expectations versus actual experience, general challenges, officer trainee leadership roles, enlisted to officer mental transition, program recommendations and improvements, key takeaways and lessons learned, and leadership methodology sustainment post-OTS. The final section, categorized as other, captured any additional insights or experiences not already discussed in the other interview question sections. Overall, the interview questions were posed to elicit interviewee's thoughts, opinions, and experiences at OTS during the timeframe previously stated. Reference the appendix for a detailed list of interview questions and format.

D.   SELECTION OF STUDY PARTICIPANTS

To ensure an unbiased selection process, the researcher used Microsoft Excel's embedded functions in order to generate a randomized interview list. To start, a new column was created in the existing spreadsheet containing the entire Goldhawk Squadron roster of officer trainee names. Using the RANDARRAY and COUNTA functions in combination, the researcher generated a list of random numbers corresponding to the officer trainees' last names in cells C2 through C80. This produced the initial randomized output in column O.

To link the randomly generated numbers with the correct trainee names, the researcher adjusted the formula in cell O2 by adding the HSTACK function referencing cells C2 to C80 before the existing functions. This adjustment caused the random numbers

to shift to column P while displaying the associated last names in column O. The researcher then further refined the output by incorporating the SORT function at the beginning of the formula in cell O2, with a "2" parameter at the end to sort the random numbers from smallest to largest. In order to prevent the list from regenerating each time the researcher worked within the spreadsheet, the values from columns O and P were copied and pasted back into the same columns using Excel's "Paste Values and Number Formatting (A)" option, thus creating a static final interview pool list for the researcher to utilize in conducting interviews.

This study utilized a sample size of nine participants to allow for thorough qualitative analysis within the study's time and resource constraints, as well as approved research protocols. Given the need to complete nine interviews, the researcher selected the top 25 officer trainees (those with the lowest random numbers generated) as the initial contact list for interview requests. The justification for this increased number is to account for potential declinations, non-responses, and disqualifications due to abbreviated training, lack of prior service, or failure to graduate from OTS. Forty-eight hours after the interview request was disseminated, 28% of recipients agreed to be interviewed. This initial call for participants yielded four scheduled interviews, one decline, two ineligible, 17 non-responses, and one automated message (email not found) responses. An additional email was sent to the next 25 officer trainees on the interview pool list, which resulted in four scheduled interviews, five ineligible, fourteen non-responses, and two automated messages (email not found). This second call for interviews generated a 36% response rate; however, the researcher still required one additional interview. Due to the considerable number of automated messages (email not found) and non-qualified responses in the second call, coupled with time constraints, the researcher sent out a third and final email to the next six officer trainees on the interview pool list which resulted in the last interview required for this study. Table 5 summarizes the response data.

Table 5.   Study Participant Interview Recruitment Summary

Email No.	Response Types				
	Affirmative (Interviews Scheduled)	Declined to Participate	Non-Qualified (Ineligible)	No Response	Automated Message (Email Not Found)
Email 1	4	1	2	17	1
Email 2	4	0	5	14	2
Email 3	1	0	0	2	3

E.   INTERVIEW AND TRANSCRIPTION PROCESS

A standardized protocol was implemented for each interview to ensure consistency throughout the process. Prior to each interview, an ethical statement was read, and interviewees were asked if they would like to proceed, as well as consented to the recording and transcription process. The ethical statement notified the interviewees of their rights and the parameters of this study, before proceeding with any interview questions. Furthermore, the researcher emphasized that participation was voluntary, and interviewees had the right to terminate the interview at any point in time. Each participant was then asked the same series of open-ended questions, as outlined in the appendix. The interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams, in conjunction with the platform's built-in record and transcription functions to ensure accurate data capture. Additionally, the researcher documented key phrases and verbiage throughout the interview process, as well as reviewed each transcript in its entirety.

To mitigate any potential biases or misinterpretations from the data, the researcher verified the information collected. Each interviewee was provided with a transcription of their interview for review, as well as the researcher's notes. This step allowed participants to validate their statements, clarify any erroneous jargon, and provide additional context if needed (Rowlands, 2021). After receiving confirmation from the interviewee that the records accurately represented their responses, or lack of confirmation within 72 hours, the interview was considered complete.

F.   DATA ANALYSIS APPROACH

This section discusses the data limitations and assumptions in this study, which explores the leadership development process and integrated training approach within OTS. Due to the exploratory nature of this research, the researcher recognizes several key factors that may influence the analysis and finds in the following chapter. Considering these elements is important for understanding the results and accuracy of the data provided. Additionally, this section describes the process of theme generation by the researcher via non-automated means, which may cause some inherent subjectivity within the analysis. This hands-on approach attempts to thoroughly analyze the data collected but presents its own set of limitations and potential biases, which is explored further.

1.   Data Limitations and Assumptions

a.   *Cognitive Bias*

Several cognitive biases may have affected the accuracy of the data. First, the length of time between event occurrence and recall has been linked to memory decay. According to Hardt et al. (2013) and Altmann and Schunn (2012), memory decay is a carefully managed systematic operation that occurs over time and the order of memory removal is heavily influenced by the area of the brain in which the memory is stored. Additionally, they specify that pattern separation is a likely cause of memory degradation (Hardt et al., 2013). Given the extended length of time between when this case study was completed and when the participants completed OTS—approximately five years— the accuracy of their memories may have faded. Moreover, Mercer and Jones (2018) reinforced this assumption based on their experiments that show recognition performance declined over a seven-day period. This decline was evident during the interviews as some participants needed cognitive retrieval assistance regarding leadership theories presented in the OTS curriculum. For example, the researcher provided additional clarification on several occasions related to the FRL methodology and the integrated training approach.

A second and different approach to the theory regarding the passage of time and recall of events time is that of interference theory, which may alter the accuracy of recounting past events. García-Rueda et al. (2002) stated their results support interference

theory as a likely cause of mnemonic recall errors. Upon review, all participants in this study completed other PME programs with curriculums similar to that of OTS. This similarity may have convoluted participants retrospection of the program review targeted in this case study. Since decay theories and interference theories are not mutually exclusive, it was assumed that a level of both cognitive biases were present in this study.

Finally, emotional ties to experiences may yield variable results in mental replay as well. Peace and Porter (2004) stated memories categorized as traumatic were far more likely to be recalled with little distortion, while [positive] emotional memories were prone to significant alteration. Assuming participants perceived OTS as an emotional experience, rather than a traumatic one, their recollection abilities may be weaker resulting in modified data, regardless of the interview method employed.

b.   Sample Size

This study involved interviews with nine participants, which limits the observations and insights collected. Although the sample size allowed for analysis of individual experiences, it does not capture the full range of perspectives within the target population. The limited number of participants could affect the reliability of the conclusions stated, especially the trends identified. However, this study assumes that the selected sample is sufficiently representative of the target population to draw meaningful conclusions, despite the possibility that some sub-groups may be underrepresented or absent from the sample group. Although a larger sample might have revealed additional patterns, it was not feasible due to time constraints and access to qualified participants. This limitation and assumption was considered during the analysis phase; therefore, broad generalizations were not made.

c.   Theme Generation

Although the hands-on thematic synthesis allowed the researcher to be immersed in the data, it is important to note the inherent subjectivity. Since the theme identification and categorization came from a manually derived methodology, the researcher's interpretations and potential biases may influence the results. Furthermore, this process is susceptible to human error, such as overlooking minor patterns or inadvertently emphasizing certain aspects over others (Dovetail Editorial Team, 2023). To mitigate this

limitation, the researcher reviewed the data multiple times and cross-checked the transcripts to bolster the validity of the findings. Nevertheless, the possibility of alternative interpretations remains, and this should be accounted for when considering the study's conclusions.

G.   SUMMARY

This chapter outlined the methodological approach used in this study. It began with an overview of the research design, followed by a description of how interview questions were formulated and used to gather data. Next, the process for selecting study participants was explained to ensure an unbiased sample. The interview and transcription procedures provided details as to how the researcher ensured data reliability throughout the process. Furthermore, the data analysis approach addressed potential cognitive biases, justification for sample size, and the methods used for identifying themes, as well as strategies employed to address data limitations and assumptions. The next chapter will present a detailed analysis of the data collected and discuss the key findings that emerged from this methodological approach.

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IV.   ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

This chapter presents a comprehensive analysis of the research findings. The analysis begins with an introductory classification of the thematic coding process and lists the activities for each phase, followed by the researcher's process. The general background information for participants and thematic groups are discussed to provide foundational support. Next, the sequential steps taken to analyze the complete dataset were outlined. Through this data review, thematic saturation occurred, and three major theme groups emerged. Each subset was further delineated into categorical statements, reinforced by consistency in responses. Interviewee interpretations of certain questions are also annotated in the variances section.

A.   INTRODUCTION

Thematic analysis is a qualitative research method that aims to uncover patterns within empirical data, which in turn reveals new knowledge and deeper comprehension of a particular subject or subjects (Naeem et al., 2023). Similar to those used in this study (e.g., interviews), qualitative data can result from a variety of narrative text such as recorded observations, surveys, or journals (Jnanathapaswi, 2021). Naeem et al. (2023) wrote the thematic analysis approach initially requires an extensive review of data to ensure researcher familiarization before generating initial codes that capture significant portions of the information. They continued to highlight that the initial codes are then examined further to develop broader themes that create a coherent narrative. According to Braun and Clark (2006), the last step of this research method involves a final assessment, which includes extracting examples in support of the themes generated and linking the analysis to the research questions. As illustrated by the detailed phase descriptions in Figure 4 and specifically demonstrated in Figure 5, this methodical process highlights how Naeem and Ozuem (2022) applied thematic analysis to examine social media content and interview data regarding COVID-19 misinformation and panic buying behaviors.

	PHASES	DESCRIPTION OF THE ANALYSIS PROCESS
1	Familiarising Data	1. Narrative preparation, i.e. transcribing data 2. Rereading the data and noting down initial ideas
2	Generating Codes	1. Coding interesting features of the data systematically cross entire data set 2. Collating data relevant to each code
3	Searching Themes	1. Collating codes into potential themes 2. Gathering all data relevant to each potential theme
4	Reviewing Themes	1. Checking if themes work in relation to the coded extracts 2. Checking if themes work in relation to the entire data set 3. Reviewing data to search for additional themes 4. Generating a thematic "map" of the analysis
05	Defining & Naming Themes	1. On-going analysis to refine the specifics of each theme and the overall story of the analysis. 2. Generating clear definitions and names for each theme
6	Producing Report	1. Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples 2. Final analysis of selected extracts 3. Relating the analysis back to the research question, objectives and previous literature reviewed

Figure 4.   Six Steps in Thematic Analysis. Source: Braun and Clark (2006)

The researcher's theme generation process started with a manual review of all interview transcripts and recordings, where initial observations and potential codes were annotated (Naeem et al., 2023). Following this preliminary review, a comprehensive summary sheet was then created, capturing key quotes, concepts, and observations from each interview in Microsoft Excel (Naeem & Ozuem, 2022). For confidentiality purposes, participants were assigned numerical identifiers on the Microsoft Excel summary sheet rather than using their names. Continuing with the thematic coding approach, the researcher identified recurring patterns and ideas across the dataset (Dovetail Editorial Team, 2023). These initial codes were then grouped and refined into broader themes through an iterative process of comparison and synthesis (Braun & Clark, 2006). Main themes and subthemes emerged from this analysis, with continuous refinement occurring as more data was processed. The theme generation process continued until thematic

saturation was reached, where no new significant themes emerged from additional data analysis (Rahimi & Khatooni, 2024).
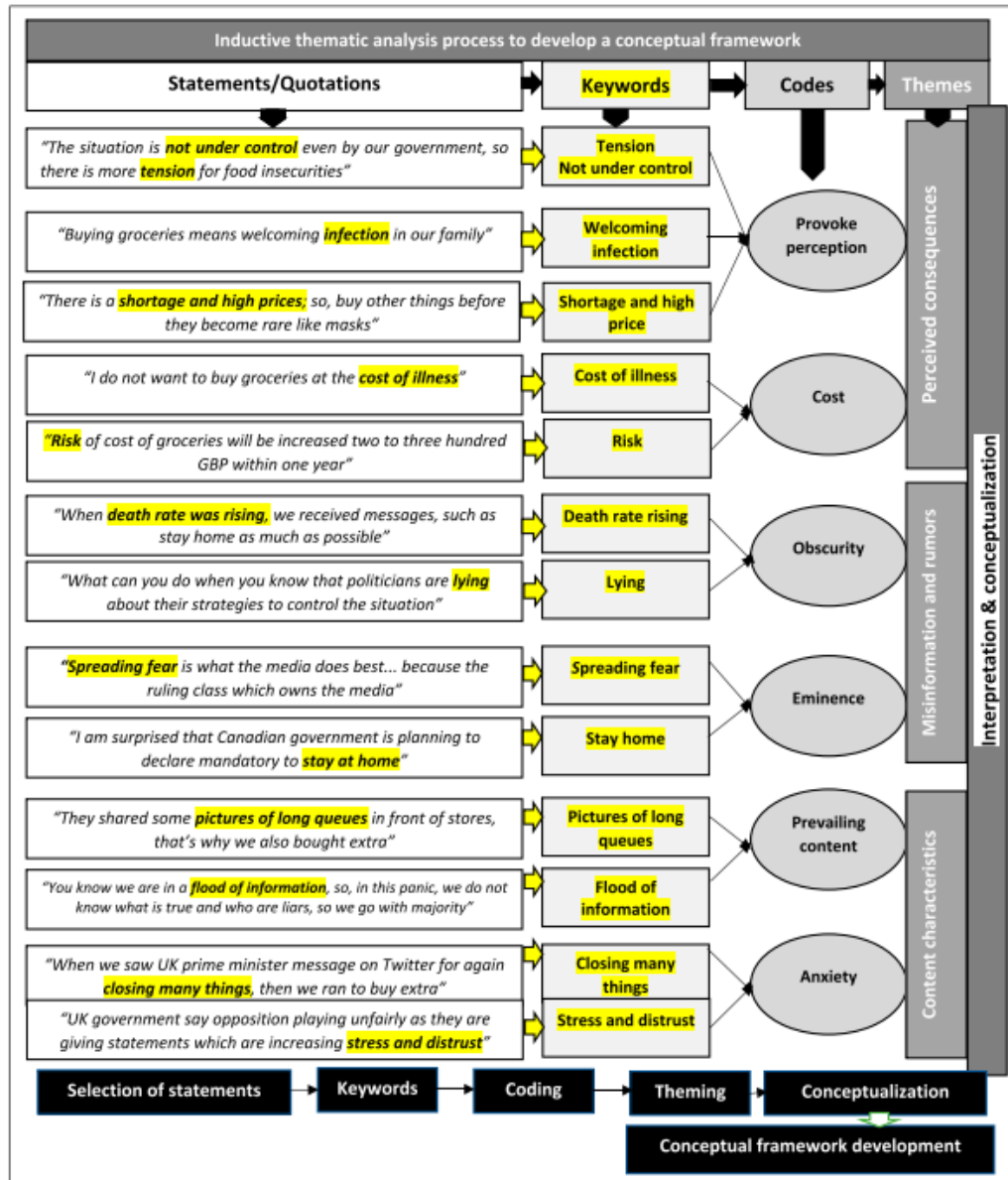

Figure 5.   Thematic Approach. Source: Naeem and Ozuem (2022)

The participant group represented a range in military service length and educational backgrounds. The USAF was the branch of service for all participants, ranging from active duty, guard, and reserve in terms of military status. The average years of service between

all interviewees was twelve, with three participants having ten years or less time in service (TIS) prior to attending OTS and six with more than ten years TIS pre-OTS (see Table 6). Additionally, the highest level of education achieved prior to attending OTS was a bachelor's degree for eight participants and a master's degree for one. Post-OTS, three participants are currently pursuing their master's degrees and one a doctoral degree, therefore reducing the number of participants classified in the Bachelor's category (see Table 7). Additionally, three participants have earned their master's degree as well since graduating from the program. Table 8 presents the various reasons for participants' motivational justifications for transitioning from the enlisted corps to the officer corps. Due to the open-ended nature of the interview questions, participants shared various reasons for their decision to pursue a commission in the USAF. All nine cited meaningful change and expanded leadership responsibilities as a primary factor, while four stated that it was due to the natural career progression in their career field. Additionally, five participants expressed a financial motive behind their decision, while one highlighted the long-term reciprocal investment in the USAF. Moreover, four participants emphasized their desire to improve leadership experiences for the next generation of leaders, thereby counterbalancing poor leadership experiences in their careers. These motivational factors are presented to provide contextual background in understanding participants' OTS experiences only and are not incorporated into the three major thematic groups discussed later.

Table 6. Time in Service Classification.

Participants (n)	Years (X), X ≤ 10 years	Years (X), X > 10 Years
Number of Participants	3	6

Table 7. Highest Education Levels Earned Pre- and Post-OTS.

Education Level	Bachelor's Earned	Pending Master's	Master's Earned	Doctoral Pending	Doctoral Earned
Pre-OTS Participants (n)	8	0	1	0	0
Post-OTS Participants (n)	2	3	3	1	0

Table 8.   Enlisted to Officer Motivational Factor Categories.

Reason	Expanded Leadership Impact & Meaningful Change	Natural Career Progression	Financial Decision (e.g., higher pay, enhanced retirement	Improve Leadership for Future Generations	Long-Term Career Investment
Participants (n)	9	4	5	4	1

The next section presents the three major theme groups, in alignment with the research questions, that materialized from the researcher's review and analysis. For this study, the researcher derived core statements from key phrases and codes. The program's structural components, content delivery methods, and perceived value provide the baseline for Theme Groups One, Two, and Three. Theme Group One (TG1) provides categorical statements from interviewees concerning their perceptions and expectations of OTS. Additionally, Theme Group Two (TG2) catalogs thematic outcomes from interviewees regarding the teaching methods and leadership development aspects at OTS. Finally, Theme Group Three (TG3) synopsizes themes pertaining to the integrated training methodology and general feedback about the program.

B.   TREND ANALYSIS

This section presents the three major theme groups that materialized from the researcher's review and analysis. Prior to the researcher's analysis, all interviewees were provided with a copy of their transcript, in addition to the researcher's notes, to confirm the accuracy of this information. After confirmation, the researcher manually reviewed each transcript, summarizing the interviewee's statements. This information was input into a Microsoft Excel Interview Summary sheet to provide a visual output of all data collected. The researcher then compared the summarized material in the excel sheet to the handwritten notes during the interview process, as well as listened to each interview recording to ensure recurring phrases and core verbiage annotated was factual and true. Key words were highlighted throughout the excel sheet, thus illuminating thematic

convergence. Continuing with the thematic framework showcased in Figures 4 and 5, the researcher condensed keywords into simplified codes. As a result, 17 distinct codes emerged to provide the baseline for potential themes. These 17 codes were then grouped into three main themes, which were defined and named. TG1 consists of the net positive outcome, initial weeks, emotional stressors, and training comparison codes. TG2 comprises leadership exercises, curriculum repetition, practical preference, checklist mentality, values disconnect, and class size codes. TG3 includes the remaining codes: networking, prior-enlisted reliance, alternate pathways, transition challenges, instructor roles, standards inconsistency, and team dynamics. In line with the last phase of the thematic approach, each theme is supported by specific examples that relate to this study's research questions and objectives. Note, numerical identifiers are used to maintain interviewees' confidentiality, therefore no titles, ranks, genders, or any other personal information are included. The next subsections are the direct result of this process.

1.   Theme Group 1: Unmet Training Expectations

TG1 captures participants' perceptions and unmet program expectations. As annotated in Table 9, four categorical statements summarize the perceptions of interviewees concerning their leadership journey at OTS. Overall, seven of the nine participants expected OTS to be a similar experience to Basic Military Training (BMT), with specific attention to advanced leadership capabilities; however, it failed to achieve this goal in reality. Additionally, six participants felt OTS was a good experience as a whole, while also expressing that the first few weeks of the program provided little to no-value in terms of leadership development and professional productivity. In general, "OTS is a good baseline - a foundation to reference," stated Participant 4 (interview with author, September 26, 2024) but "you can definitely expedite the process" (Participant 1, interview with author, September 24, 2024). Finally, three of the study's participants stated the current PCS process to and from OTS created unnecessary emotional stress on trainees and their families. An OTS trainee faced several challenges simultaneously (e.g., redirection of household goods shipment, assignment renegotiation, family relocation, etc.) due to possible academic failure and dismissal from the program (Participant 1, interview with author, September 24, 2024).

Table 9.   Unmet Training Expectations.

Phrase	Participants (n)
Expected OTS to be similar to BMT with enhanced leadership development. Reality did not match/met expectations.	7
Overall, OTS was a good experience.	6
The first 2-3 weeks of OTS provided little to no value-added activity for prior enlisted members.	6
Current OTS and PCS cycle creates unnecessary emotional stress on trainees and their families.	3

2.   Theme Group 2: Teaching and Leadership Development Deficiencies

The themes presented in TG2 correspond to the teaching methods and leadership enhancement framework at OTS, which resulted in several deficiencies (reference Table 10). According to all nine participants, the SLP's and other leadership exercises were growth-generating events. However, more leadership exercises, case studies, and practical applications, combined with a modified or reduced academic portion, would have significantly enhanced the leadership development process even further, according to eight participants. One participant highlighted this gap between priorities, stating "I think we had a missed opportunity…there needs to be more active leadership in general. Our time was spent learning how to configure and format a paper properly. I feel like there are more emerging issues…I have never seen anybody fired for an incorrectly formatted bullet background paper" (Participant 3, interview with author, September 25, 2024). Additionally, seven participants claimed the program's curriculum was virtually the same as other PME courses. This resulted in a shortage of expanded leadership knowledge for six participants. When asked during their interview, one participant shared their frustration concerning this issue, stating "I was hoping for more leader specific kind of education…more discussions of how to lead troops…what I found was very surface level. There wasn't a lot of critical thinking, and it didn't get to the heart of what I would argue is true leadership. I was left with a little bit of disappointment" (Participant 6, interview with author, September 26, 2024. Moreover, five of the study's participants felt OTS demonstrated a clear disconnect between stated principles and actual conduct. The apparent

"checklist" mentality in many OTS staff and instructors seemed to show what OTS values in future leaders (Participant 1, interview with author, September 24, 2024; Participant 3, interview with author, September 25, 2024). This was evident in which trainees were presented awards upon graduation from OTS (Participant 1, interview with author, September 24, 2024; Participant 3, interview with author, September 25, 2024). Participant 3 went on to further explain that OTS produces a "product that meets the need, but I don't think it's the best product that could be made...there is room for improvement. I think they are still trying to figure that out as an institution," referring to OTS' output of trainees. Finally, five participants believed the "Godzilla" class size was a poorly executed occurrence that diminished leadership development opportunities. One participant explained how the oversized class limited the practical leadership possibilities, stating "I think as far as the [OTS] leadership framework goes, it has some room to grow for prior enlisted…to ensure they have the opportunity to lead, to understand what it means to be a leader, and to understand the level of accountability that is expected...the Godzilla class made that even more challenging due to the number of students they were pushing through so there were less opportunities for those leadership roles for each individual" (Participant 5, interview with author, September 26, 2024).

Table 10.　Teaching and Leadership Development Deficiencies.

Phrase	Participants (n)
Student leadership positions/roles were a value-added activities.	9
OTS should provide more case studies, spend more time on leadership exercises (i.e., hands-on experiences), and less time on academics (i.e., papers, exams).	8
OTS curriculum was very similar to other PME courses.	7
OTS did not provide new leadership styles, methods, and/or tactics for prior-enlisted trainees	6
OTS does not align its actions with its stated values; it stifles creative and innovative thinking and rewards "checklist" mentality leadership.	5
Due to the class size, trainees (both prior and non-prior) were robbed of leadership experiences/development	5

3. Theme Group 3: Mixed Training Environment Challenges

Lastly, TG3 provides insights into the challenges associated with the integrated training approach and general feedback from participants, as detailed in Table 11. Of note, all study participants unanimously agreed on two of elements of OTS. One, it was a positive, networking experience, and two, OTS relied too heavily on prior-enlisted members to teach non-prior trainees. According to Participant 2, "networking has always been the number one thing I've taken away from any military education" (interview with author, September 24, 2024). These shared positions are important themes in this study that influence the recommendations provided in the next chapter.

Another common belief expressed during interviews was that prior-enlisted trainees should have a divergent or alternate path from non-prior trainees. Eight participants felt the integrated training methodology needs a complete redesign, thus restructuring the track that both prior and non-prior enlisted trainees complete. When referring to effective training techniques for prior-enlisted members, one participant stated, "I think there are better ways to educate those with prior military experience and especially those already in leadership roles, like SNCOs" (Participant 7, interview with author, September 26, 2024). Participant 1 reinforced this viewpoint, stating "prior enlisted members should have a different OTS…especially if you have been through any PME. A lot of stuff you already know and was wasted time" (interview with author, September 24, 2024). However, four interviewees noted that a completely segregated training environment will hinder non-prior trainees' development and overall program success (Participant 3, interview with author, September 25, 2024; Participant 7, interview with author, September 26, 2024; Participant 8, interview with author, September 27, 2024; Participant 9, interview with author, September 28, 2024).

Another challenge that emerged was that of program length and reframing mental models. Seven participants stated the OTS timeframe of eight weeks was too compressed for non-prior enlisted members and overextended for prior service members. In addition, over half of the interviewees stated OTS does not help prior service members transition from an enlisted leader mindset to that of a USAF officer mentality. Participant 6 stated, "I think it [OTS] didn't quite make the jump over to what it means to be an officer, or what

leadership looks like outside of theoretical doctrine…it's really important to take those prior enlisted and help walk them through this transition from how to be an enlisted leader to what it means to be an officer leader" (interview with author, September 26, 2024). On the other hand, some participants believed OTS solidified this transition by differentiating the greater accountability and responsibility burden that lies with the officer corps (Participant 1, interview with author, September 24, 2024; Participant 5, interview with author, September 26, 2024; Participant 7, interview with author, September 26, 2024; Participant 8, interview with author, September 27, 2024).

In addition to the previous patterns, five participants thought OTS instructors misunderstood their role, and OTS as a whole was disorganized and inconsistent in the application of policies, standards, and practices. One participant expressed their frustration with this lack of clear parameters, explaining, "I couldn't really gauge what kind of leader or how I was doing as a leader because it was just so inconsistent of what their expectations were" (Participant 6, interview with author, September 26, 2024). The varying degrees of policy and standard application across 24 TRS and Det 12 also created animosity and chaos among trainees and student leaders (Participant 1, interview with author, September 24, 2024; Participant 2, interview with author, September 24, 2024; Participant 3, interview with author, September 25, 2024; Participant 5, interview with author, September 26, 2024; Participant 6, interview with author, September 26, 2024). Finally, four participants felt that managing team dynamics and competing personalities were the most challenging aspects of OTS. Being open-minded and a collaborative team member were also cited among four of the study's interviewees as the key takeaways from the program.

Table 11.   Mixed Training Environment Challenges.

Phrase	Participants (n)
OTS was a networking experience.	9
OTS relies too heavily on prior-enlisted trainees to teach non-prior trainees.	9
Prior-enlisted trainees should have a divergent or alternate pathway from non-prior trainees in OTS.	8
OTS timeframe of 8 weeks is too short for non-prior trainees and too long for prior trainees.	7

Phrase	Participants (n)
OTS does not help prior-enlisted members transition from an enlisted leader mindset to an officer mindset.	5
OTS instructors misunderstood their role; OTS instructors should mentor/facilitate more and not replicate MTI mannerisms.	5
OTS was disorganized, chaotic, and inconsistent in policies/standards/practices.	5
One of the most challenging aspects of OTS for prior-enlisted trainees was managing personalities/team dynamics.	4
Being open-minded and helping others/being a team player are key takeaways from OTS.	4

C.   ANOMALIES

Participants had minor differences in their understanding of four interview questions (see Table 12), an unintended but notable occurrence. The word usage, phrasing, and/or sentence composition might have contributed to this range. Additionally, the diverse professional backgrounds, military experiences, and varying leadership styles of interviewees potentially added to this uncertainty.

The first question that presented some challenges was question 10 in the interview process. The researcher clarified that the different phases of the program were in reference to the beginning, midpoint, and end of participants time at OTS. Another question that the researcher explained further was question 15. Participants required supplemental information concerning the phrase "leadership methodology." The researcher's intent behind this question was to gauge participants' ability to integrate OTS's leadership teachings, as well as other leadership skills gained throughout the program, into their unit directly after graduation. As the interview continued, participants also struggled with question 19. The researcher repeated this question on five occasions and summarized it for two participants due to the question's length. Lastly, question 25 also required the researcher to decipher the phrase "OTS leadership construct." While the goal was to obtain data about participants' ability to translate OTS leadership teachings into real-world interactions, it was not adequately defined in order for interviewees to quickly understand the intent. Overall, the lack of clarity in these interview questions may have impacted the responses provided, thus affecting the themes provided previously and the recommendations presented in the following chapter. Nevertheless, the

researcher provided additional clarification when asked by interviewees to mitigate this issue and does not significantly impact the results of this study.

Table 12.   Problematic Interview Questions.

Question #10. How did you feel about your leadership capabilities during the different phases of the program? Can you describe those feelings?
Question #15. How have you been able to incorporate the leadership methodology OTS proposed in operational challenges immediately upon graduation?
Question #19. Considering the diverse backgrounds and experiences of your fellow OTS trainees, including line and non-line officers, as well as prior service and non-prior enlisted members, how did the application of the full-range leadership methodology vary among individuals?
Question #25. How do you sustain and continue to build upon what you learned within the OTS leadership construct?

Another noteworthy occurrence was an outlier data point regarding the concept of divergent pathways for prior-enlisted and non-prior enlisted members. A singular interviewee had a differing perspective from the sample group. In contrast to the other eight study participants, Participant 9 felt the eight-week, integrated training pipeline used during OTS class 19-07 was effective and preferred that all trainees received the same training as a whole (interview with author, September 28, 2024). This distinction demonstrates a contrasting opinion regarding optimal training techniques.

D.   SUMMARY

This chapter presented this study's analysis and findings. The approach to thematic analysis was discussed and key demographic content was provided for enhanced theme clarity. Significant insights were revealed in TG1, participant's expectations versus actuality. Additionally, TG2 highlighted recurring data points about OTS teaching methods and leadership development aspects. Moreover, the integrated training methodology was expanded upon by participants' responses and overarching comments concerning OTS improvements were outlined in TG3. Finally, variability in participants' understanding of several interview questions were articulated and significant outliers presented. The next chapter provides recommendations and areas for further research.

V. RECOMMENDATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This chapter provides recommendations informed by preliminary findings from prior-enlisted members of the "Godzilla" class, 19-07, and identifies areas for future research. Although these recommendations are derived directly from this study's data points, they warrant further research across a broader range of trainees and require the use of other data collection methods before any implementation should occur. Based on the findings from the nine prior service participants in this case study, several context-specific considerations and potential research directions are provided.

A. RECOMMENDATIONS

    (1)   OTS could consider modifying parts of its program structure for prior-enlisted trainees, in terms of training pathway and timeline, while continuing the current practice of integration.

As suggested by study participants, OTS could develop a divergent training pathway for prior-enlisted members while maintaining some integrated components to create a more robust training program. This study revealed that line and non-line officer trainees should remain in a blended training environment to continue the valuable networking opportunities across various career fields. On the other hand, feedback suggested the program length could benefit from revision. Participants reported concerns about the timeline, suggesting either a shortened program length or restructured activities within the initial weeks of OTS for prior-enlisted members to better utilize their time.

    (2)   OTS could consider adjusting its leadership development methodology for prior-enlisted trainees, particularly senior ranking members, as opposed to others in terms of leadership exercises, case studies, and academic curriculum, while continuing the current practice of SLPs.

Specific adjustments to the leadership curriculum could address participants reported leadership advancement needs, as well as transition issues experienced at OTS. The prior-enlisted participants indicated that an increase in hands-on, real-world leadership exercises, combined with case study analysis and guided group discussions, could better facilitate their development of mental models for future leadership positions in the

operational USAF. Furthermore, an opportunity exists for targeted leadership sessions that bridge the transitional gap between enlisted and officer mentality, as identified in this study. Such sessions could consist of sharing unconventional prior leadership events and outcomes, methods for supporting troops through adverse situations, balancing accountability and discipline with mentorship, and other scenarios not covered in the curriculum.

The results also implied an increase in team leadership exercises, such as those experienced during HELPS/WELPS, EMLEX, and LRC, which further enhances trainees' collaborative skills while managing different personality types in a dynamic environment. Study participants also noted that reducing the emphasis on academic papers and exams in favor of applied leadership training, such as squadron-level operations, mission planning events, and resource management exercises, would better align with the challenges they encountered in their post-graduation roles. Given the perceived high redundancy in enlisted PME concepts to the OTS curriculum among study participants, the program could benefit from customizable training considering the diverse specialties of prior service members going through OTS. An example would be tailored lessons for medical officers concerning patient care prioritization, hospital staff management, and balancing clinical needs with military requirements. On the other hand, a maintenance officer's training could focus on aircraft readiness decisions and resource allocation for repair operations. This training configuration may reduce the repetitious nature of basic military concepts and allow for focused training in critical areas where gaps exist in these members' leadership abilities, thus increasing the trainee's potential for success in future roles. Finally, continuing with the current SLP structure allows for mentorship channels and practical leadership experiences in a merged setting, as highlighted by all nine participants in this case study.

(3)   OTS might consider enforcing standardizing policies across both training squadrons (e.g. 24 TRS and Det 12), particularly in regards to evaluation criteria and critical thinking capabilities.

The perceived inconsistent application of standards among trainees, instructors, and staff created chaos and perceived unfairness in participants' training experience, thus reinforcing the recommendation of standardized policies and practices, as well as

redesigned criteria. This study found that varying evaluation criteria and assessment methods between both squadrons stifled participants' critical thinking skills, resulting in what participants described as the "checklist" mentality. Due to these findings, equitable implementation of OTS principles and evaluation criteria could present a culture of unity and a cohesive environment for trainee development. Moreover, this study's findings revealed an opportunity to improve the program's transparency and objectivity, thus reconciling disparities felt by participants with regard to OTS' purpose of developing the next wave of USAF and USSF officers and its stated values.

      (4)   OTS might examine the informal training burden experienced by prior-enlisted members and develop strategies to minimize their unofficial teaching responsibilities.

Given the significant reliance on prior-enlisted trainees to informally assist non-prior enlisted trainees, as highlighted in this case study, the program should consider reinforcing instructor roles to mitigate this reliance factor. Participants felt that spending significant amounts of time training non-prior enlisted members potentially hindered their own growth opportunities but also shed light on an area for improvement for OTS. By reducing this dependence on prior-enlisted members, participants believe that this reallocation of training responsibilities will allow them more time for personal development and a space for discussing their prior leadership experiences that can inspire and educate others. To address these concerns, OTS should implement focus groups with prior-enlisted members to uncover the underlying causes of informal training burdens and craft effective solutions.

B.   FUTURE RESEARCH

One area for future research is the study of non-prior enlisted members' experiences at OTS within Class 19-07. One participant suggested surveying this sub-group to gain insights into the various training needs of officer trainees based on their military service history. Since non-prior enlisted members have no military experience prior to attending OTS, their perspectives can add to how this group is trained for their future leadership roles in military units. This additional research may support or challenge the recommendation

that prior-enlisted and non-prior enlisted members need a complete or modified training track, as validated by the results of this study. By understanding the distinct needs of both groups of trainees, OTS can more effectively cultivate these future leaders through tailored training pathways.

Future studies could also include a larger and more diverse group of research participants. This case study was limited to nine prior-enlisted participants from the 24 TRS to allow for a focused analysis while maintaining a manageable scope and remaining within the approved boundaries set by the Naval Postgraduate School (NPS) Institutional Review Board (IRB). Although the participants selected were based on Excel's random list generator, this list of interviewees came from one of five student squadrons under the 24 TRS student wing structure, which is approximately 2% of the prior-enlisted population of this graduating class. Additional sample diversity could include the Det 12 squadron trainees, prior-enlisted members from other branches of service, and space force candidates. In particular, trainees from Det 12 can provide additional insight into possible cultural and educational variabilities cited by participants in this case study. A larger sample size may provide a wider variety of perspectives to create more robust theme-generation outcomes. Additionally, these discoveries could reinforce or disprove the results and recommendations presented in this case study. Given this case study's lack of generalizations due to the unique period and limited sample group, this additional research could inform future program modifications for officer development.

Another area for future research is a comparative analysis of prior-enlisted members of Class 19-07 and recent prior-enlisted graduates of OTS to analyze program evolution and the effectiveness of the new leadership framework. Although beyond the scope of this case study, the new OTS framework, called "OTS Victory," is the latest program revamp. This new approach includes five modules that aim to improve fundamental officer training in core Air Force and Space Force competencies over a sixty-day training period, in addition to restructuring the generalist instructor role with subject matter specialists in specific areas (Air University Public Affairs, 2023). Future researchers could gather data on leadership refinement approaches and the impact of prior service members in an integrated training environment to better understand how these structural

changes have impacted trainees' experiences, as compared to OTS' stated goals and objectives. Such research could reveal if these programmatic changes have enhanced OTS' ability to develop military leaders, particularly prior service members.

Lastly, additional studies could further examine this topic by utilizing multiple data collection methods to capture a broader perspective of prior-enlisted trainees' experiences during class 19-07. Although this study used interviews, surveys also offer valuable quantitative data to supplement this qualitative data further. Additionally, focus groups might provide another layer to this research area by promoting active discussions between prior service trainees who experienced this training environment together, thus potentially exposing other struggles and accomplishments that would otherwise not emerge from individual interviews. Moreover, examining the end-of-course feedback forms submitted by prior-enlisted members during the "Godzilla" class could reveal some additional patterns and perspectives not documented in this study.

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VI. CONCLUSION

This capstone project captured the thoughts, feelings, experiences, and perceptions of nine prior-enlisted members who graduated from the record-breaking OTS class 19-07, also known as the "Godzilla" class. Through a series of semi-structured interviews, this qualitative case study codified their unique perspectives on their leadership development journey, refinement of leadership skills and future role preparation, and the integrated training approach used during that period. Although the findings of this study cannot be generalized beyond these participants' experiences, their stories provide valuable input to add among the scholarly works of this research area. This chapter provides a final statement which responds to the research questions and imparts a closing statement that emphasizes the value in documenting these service members' experiences during this historical event.

A. FINAL STATEMENT

This case study answered the following three research questions from the vantage point of nine participants:

(1) What are the perceptions of prior enlisted trainees in OTS Class 19-07 regarding their leadership development journey in the program, and how does this compare with their pre-program expectations?

Overall, participants shared a range of pre-program expectations and real-world experiences. Seven participants largely expected OTS to mirror BMT nuances and experiential learning but with the core focus of leadership development in an officer role. However, their journey did not match those expectations. While six interviewees stated the program was a good experience overall, they felt that the initial weeks at OTS provided little value to propel their professional growth. In summary, these individual experiences suggest a disconnect between expectations and reality for these prior-enlisted members during this unique training period.

(2) Based on OTS Class 19-07 teaching methods and curriculum, in what ways have prior enlisted members refined their leadership skills and how do they

believe these experiences prepared them for future leadership roles within the USAF?

As noted by seven participants, the curriculum similarity between OTS and other USAF PME courses limited their leadership maturation process. This lack of new leadership content was articulated by six participants, five of which expressed a strong sentiment about the failure to fulfill OTS' objective of transitioning trainees from an enlisted leader to officer leader mindset which is required for future leadership roles. Additionally, eight participants believed that increased hands-on leadership exercises, case studies, and group-led discussions would have been better a better use of time rather than the then-current academic assignments, exams, and other classroom materials. Moreover, the unprecedented class size of 19-07 deprived some trainees of added leadership refinement opportunities, as stated by five of this study's participants. Nevertheless, all participants valued the student leadership roles and appreciated the challenging dynamic they offered.

(3) How has the integrated training methodology at OTS influenced the leadership skills of prior-enlisted members, and what feedback do they suggest for this approach?

Participants provided several key takeaways from their experiences and offered various program suggestions in terms of the combined training approach. Firstly, all study participants expressed the enriching and rewarding nature of the networking aspect regarding the integrated training methodology. However, they unanimously expressed concern about the program's heavy reliance on prior service trainees to develop and train non-prior enlisted trainees. Given this belief, eight of the nine participants feel that prior-enlisted trainees could benefit from a modified training path at OTS to ensure prior-enlisted trainees also achieve the leadership skillset stipulated by OTS. This belief also stems from seven participants' viewpoint on program length - eight weeks being too short for non-prior enlisted trainees and too long for those with previous military backgrounds. Additionally, five of the participants stated OTS instructors misunderstood their role at OTS and suggested that these staff members embrace a mentality of mentoring. Moreover, the inconsistent application of policies and procedures among the two training squadrons,

both among staff and students, created a chaotic and dysfunctional environment. Finally, four interviewees claimed the most challenging aspect of OTS was managing competing personalities in small team dynamics. However, being a team-player and open-minded were key takeaways from four participants' experiences.

B.   CLOSING STATEMENT

The cataloging of these individual experiences during the "Godzilla" class provides a unique window into this landmark moment. While these experiences cannot be generalized, they preserve personal narratives that might otherwise be neglected in similar studies. Additionally, their stories contribute to the historical record by documenting how prior-enlisted members experienced this unparalleled training environment during a period of maximum capacity at OTS. Although this study is limited in scope, these narratives provide insight into how some prior-enlisted members experienced the leadership development process during the largest class in OTS history.

Overall, the significance of this study does not lie in generating broad conclusions but in preserving the individual opinions of nine prior-enlisted members who experienced this unique moment under the umbrella of Air University. Although there were only nine members that participated in this study, they are a testament to how the USAF adapted its training methods to meet extraordinary circumstances during the "Godzilla" class of 2019. Finally, these experiences cannot be generalized beyond their immediate context, but partially fill the literary gap in this research area and may provide insight for future researchers.

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APPENDIX. INTERVIEW GUIDE

Ethical Statement

Before we begin, I'd like to emphasize the importance of ethical considerations in this study. Your participation is completely voluntary, and you have the full right to terminate the interview at any point without any consequences. Please be assured that all personal data collected during this process will remain confidential and will be used solely for the purposes of this research. I adhere strictly to data protection guidelines to ensure your information is secure. That said, your insights are invaluable to this study, and by participating, you are contributing to a deeper understanding of this research area. Nevertheless, your welfare is my top priority, and I respect your decisions regarding participation and the sharing of information.

I will be engaging with you to explore and understand your experiences, thoughts, and opinions regarding Officer Training School. Our conversation will delve into various aspects of your journey through the program, including the challenges you faced, the skills and knowledge you acquired, and your personal growth throughout the process. I'm interested in hearing about your perspectives on the curriculum, the teaching methodologies, leadership development, and the overall environment at OTS. Again, your insights will be invaluable in painting a comprehensive picture of what it means to go through this pivotal phase of military training and leadership development. Do you wish to continue to the interview questions?

Background/General:

- What was and is your current military status (active duty, guard, reserve, separated, medically retired, other)?

- What branch of service did you serve in prior to OTS and what is your current branch of service?

- How many years of service did you have prior to attending OTS? How many years of service do you have now?

- What is your highest level of education achieved prior to and after OTS?

- What was your motivation to transition from enlisted to officer?

- Prior to attending OTS, did you have any leadership roles/experiences? Please describe at least two if applicable.

Program (OTS):

- Can you describe your overall experience at OTS?

- How many other professional military education programs did you complete prior to OTS and do you feel their leadership development aspects were better or worse than OTS?

- What were your initial expectations of OTS before attending and how did reality compare with regards to leadership development?

- How did you feel about your leadership capabilities during the different phases of the program? Can you describe those feelings?

- What were the most challenging aspects of OTS for you in terms of leadership?

- In what ways did your experience at OTS influence your thoughts or feelings about how military leadership is taught?

- What were the leadership styles, methods, and tactics that were new knowledge to you at OTS?

- Did you hold a student/officer trainee leadership role during OTS? If yes, could you specify the role and share your experience in that capacity?

- How have you been able to incorporate the leadership methodology OTS proposed in operational challenges immediately upon graduation?

- How did OTS help you transition from an enlisted leader mindset to that of an officer in the USAF?

- Did you feel more or less prepared as a leader upon graduation from OTS and why?

- How, if at all, do you think prior-enlisted members could gain additional leadership skills with a divergent pathway from non-prior members at OTS?

- Considering the diverse backgrounds and experiences of your fellow OTS trainees, including line and non-line officers, as well as prior service and non-prior enlisted members, how did the application of the full-range leadership methodology vary among individuals?

- What advice or suggestions would you offer to future prior-enlisted members preparing to go through OTS?

- What were the key takeaways and lessons learned from your experience at OTS regarding leadership?

- How do you think the OTS leadership framework has influenced you personally, professionally, and/or emotionally?

- How do you sustain and continue to build upon what you learned within the OTS leadership construct?

Other:

- Is there any other information or experience you wish to share that we have not already discussed?

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