

Reaching Out, Reaching Up

by Don Vaughan

For professional guidance and direction, black servicemembers need look no further than these mentoring groups.

As a successful Army officer, Col. Dorene Hurt has worked hard to earn the position she holds today: Chief of Staff of the Army Chair and assistant professor of military strategy and logistics at the Industrial College of the Armed Forces, Fort McNair, Washington, D.C. But Hurt says she owes much of that success to the example and advice provided by her mentor, Lt. Gen. Julius W. Becton, USA-Ret.

"Foremost was seeing early on what good leadership looked like, and I saw that firsthand in Lieutenant General Becton," Hurt says. "When people who have integrity, [who] are caring, and who have paid their dues set the example for you, that influences you significantly."

For Becton, the relationship was all about taking a good soldier under his wing and helping her become the best she could be by offering career advice and helping her overcome potential obstacles. "Mentors provide guidance and direction through their actions and suggestions," Becton says. "And also by just being a friend."

Hurt is one of thousands of black servicemembers whose careers have benefited from a mentoring relationship. Today, she mentors others and helps promote the concept as vice president of communications for The ROCKS Inc., a national organization that offers advice and counsel to junior officers looking to make the military their career. For black servicemembers in the Navy or Air Force, The National Naval Officers Association (NNOA) and the Air Force Cadet Officer Mentor Action Program (AFCOMAP) offer similar career advice and support in the form of mentoring.

Rock steady

The ROCKS began in the mid-1960s as an informal meeting of Army officers assigned to the Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth, Kan. The group initially met to help each other "survive" at Fort Leavenworth, and many members continued to meet after being reassigned to the Pentagon and elsewhere in the greater Washington, D.C., area.

In the years that followed, the group grew. Realizing the need for a more structured organization, its members met Oct. 9, 1974, to formalize their organization. Those present decided to temporarily call themselves the "No Name Club" until another name could be decided.

"The leader of that organization was Brig. Gen. Roscoe Cartwright [known as Rock by his friends and colleagues]. He was assigned to the Pentagon, and he would walk the halls, meet minority officers, and tell them that they needed to check into his net," says Brig. Gen. Clara Adams-Ender, USA-Ret., who joined the organization in 1981 and now chairs its national board. "By that, he meant, 'You need to see me so I can talk to you about your assignment here ... and other things that are important for you to know and do.' He was one of the first [officers] to do that."

Cartwright died in a plane crash Dec. 1, 1974, the night the No Name Club met to choose a new name. Members voted to call the group The ROCKS as a tribute to Cartwright, Adams-Ender says, and its mission continues to follow his calling. Today, The ROCKS has 23 active chapters across the Army (including one in Iraq) and boasts a membership of more than 1,180.

"We provide a program of mentoring within the chapters and various interest groups," says Adams-Ender. "Junior officers are assigned to senior officers to discuss the things that are going on with them regarding their assignments and the goals and objectives that they have set for themselves in the Army."

The ROCKS also has a program called Leadership Outreach, in which members visit historically black colleges and universities and work with students enrolled in ROTC. Scholarships are available, and members offer information and insight into what students can expect when they come on active duty as an officer or go into a reserve unit.

"We discuss issues ranging from personal finance to developing appropriate social skills," says Adams-Ender. "It's all about having a successful first assignment within the Army, as well as a successful career."

According to Hurt, organizations like The ROCKS strengthen the U.S. military as well as the individual. "We're committed to reaching out not only to the community but [also] within the Army. That's the bottom line," she says. "And I think we have a better military for it."

Seaworthy

NNOA has a simple mission - to support the sea services in the recruitment, retention, and career development of ethnic minority officers.

"We are an essential element in maintaining operational readiness of the sea services," says NNOA National President Capt. Bernard Jackson, USN, deputy chief of staff, Navy Enterprise, Pentagon. "We provide professional development and mentoring and support cultural diversity by establishing and maintaining a positive image of the sea services in communities and educational institutions."

The organization began in 1970 when Lt. Kenneth Johnson, advisor for Minority Affairs at the U.S. Naval Academy, was charged with improving minority interest in recruitment efforts and participation in the Naval Academy Blue and Gold Program. At the time, says Jackson, there were fewer than 100 ethnic minority officers in the Navy, and fewer than 50 of them were black.

In 1971, Johnson met with fellow Navy officers Capt. Emerson Emory, CWO James Harris, Cmdr. Emmanuel Jenkins, and Capt. Claude Williams to discuss forming an organization to assist minority officer recruitment. A year later, in Annapolis, Md., they established the NNOA.

The NNOA currently has more than 800 active members in 54 chapters internationally, and mentoring remains an integral part of the organization's mission, says Jackson, who joined the organization in 1984.

"At each local chapter, senior officers engage in ongoing discussions about issues relevant to a specific career path," he says. "Through these structured mentoring sessions ... members ... can reach out to NNOA board members with specific questions."

Instructional opportunities also are provided at the NNOA's annual national conferences. At the most recent conference, for example, sessions addressed career progression and development for O3s and below and O4s and above, Jackson says.

"We also challenge our chapters to go out and expose the community to the sea services," Jackson says. "One way we do that is by having the chapters provide scholarships to high school students who want to go to college. The scholarships aren't necessarily tied to them going into the military - we also offer scholarships to young people who have demonstrated [a] strong academic performance."

Lt. Col. Dawn Harrison, G1 Operations officer for Marine Corps Base Quantico, Va., and the Marine Corps service representative to the NNOA, says joining the organization proved to be a wise move for her professionally. Today, she "pays it forward" by mentoring junior officers and encouraging them to join.

"I tell them that they don't have to come to every NNOA meeting or participate in every event," she says, "but if they stay connected, it will benefit them in the long run and benefit the other Marines who work with them."

Capt. Anthony Barnes, director of diversity at the Navy Recruiting Command in Millington, Tenn., and Navy service representative to the NNOA, agrees. "The [NNOA] provides mentors who understand the rules of the game," he says. "[Being a member] gave me the ability to come to the chess match holding chess pieces instead of checkers. My mentor helped me understand the culture and the nature of the naval officer wardroom, which was something that many of us from diverse backgrounds don't get in any other forum."

The sky's the limit

AFCOMAP was founded in June 1989 as a means to prepare Air Force cadets coming out of college for active duty. Its mission: To strengthen future Air Force leaders through mentorship.

"At the college level, we mentor cadets about what it's going to take not only to become successful officers but also successful professionals," says AFCOMAP National President Brig. Gen. Ronnie Hawkins, commander, Air Force Officer Accession and Training schools, Maxwell AFB, Ala.

"We offer advice regarding their finances and their personal life - what they need to do on the professional side. Once they go on active duty, the focus shifts to the company grade officers and what it's going to take for them to become field grade officers or career airmen officers. We then start tailoring our program on a monthly basis to topics that are important for their success in the Air Force."

It's a program with a proven track record. "If you were to approach many African-American colonels right now, they would tell you that it's because of the [AFCOMAP] back when they were captains that they're sitting where they are right now," Hawkins says.

AFCOMAP has 12 active chapters at U.S. Air Force installations and between 300 and 400 members. In addition to giving career development mentoring to Air Force cadets and active duty airmen, it strives to boost diversity in the Air Force by providing mentoring even to middle and high schools.

"We have seen that there is a propensity for African Americans and other minorities not to go to college," Hawkins says. "If you're going to have a diverse Air Force, you need to make sure you have a good pool of candidates coming out of college, which means you need to get the right numbers going into college. Our middle and high school mentoring program is going to be a fundamental foundation [of that goal]."

Hawkins, who joined AFCOMAP in 1991 at the encouragement of one of his mentors, speaks from personal experience regarding the benefits of membership. "The biggest thing the organization did for me was make me cognizant of how important it was for my records to be properly written in order for me to be competitive," he says. "Let's face it, records get promoted, people really don't. So the mentorship tied to that was, I think, one of the critical keys to the success I enjoy today. [It] also taught me how to be a mentor to others. And as the people I mentor become mentors, the whole Air Force gets better and, quite frankly, I enjoy that success, too."

Organizations such as AFCOMAP provide a direct benefit to the military in general and the Air Force in particular, Hawkins says. "The biggest way is [that] we prepare officers for the Air Force and the mission within the Air Force, which is tied to being an expeditionary airman," he explains. "All of our focus is toward that. So when you talk about readiness, we're telling our members that the best thing they could be doing is getting boots in the sand. That helps everyone."