

From CAP cadet to Capitol Hill A Blueprint for Turning a Dream into a Dream Job

By Kristi Carr

Do you know where your future is? Well, of course not — it's impossible to see into the future. But you can strengthen your chances of having a productive and meaningful life by making the right choices early on.

Here's how a decision made in his early teens helped take U.S. Air Force Maj. Randall J. Heusser to an office on Capitol Hill by the time he'd reached his mid-30s.

A DREAM

"I became fascinated with reading about space exploration and astronauts at an early age," Heusser said, "and I quickly learned that military aviation provided a direct avenue to NASA's astronaut program."

After additional investigation, he discovered the opportunities available to young people through Civil Air Patrol's cadet program. Still a year away from high school, he said, "I was fortunate to join an amazing cadet squadron, the [Paradise Valley Cadet Squadron 310] Wolverines, in the east valley of Phoenix, Ariz."

A FOUNDATION

Under the guidance of the squadron's cadet commander at the time, Bill Daehler, Heusser soon found himself surrounded by adults and cadets who were deeply committed to the CAP cadet program and to the U.S.

Moreover, he eagerly immersed himself in numerous cadet activities beyond the scope of his immediate squadron. At the wing level, he attended a glider program and obtained his solo glider certificate. "What an amazing and unique



Randall Heusser's dreams of flying took off quite literally in KC-10 aircraft, which he flew on more than 100 combat missions over southwest Asia. His "welcome home" committee included his wife, Erin, and children, from left, Sean, Joanna and Wyatt.

opportunity for high school students!” Heusser said of the program.

At the national level, he attended a flight encampment at Beale Air Force Base, Calif., Cadet Officer School at Maxwell AFB, Ala., and the International Air Cadet Exchange program, which took him to Britain.

“I’m not sure any other program in the world besides CAP could provide this kind of education — aviation, leadership development and introductions to both military and civil service — to students at this age level,” he said.

By the time he was a senior at Chaparral High School in Scottsdale, Ariz., Heusser had earned CAP’s highest cadet honor, the Gen. Carl A. Spaatz Award.

AN EDUCATION

“While my high school academic records and varsity sports participation helped, I am absolutely convinced it was my membership in CAP that allowed me to be nominated by Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., to attend the U.S. Air Force Academy as part of the Class of 2002,” he said.

There he followed in the footsteps of Dan Daehler, whom he knew from his CAP cadet squadron, and was classmates with another squadron member, Stephen Olivares. Daehler now flies F-16s for the U.S. Air Force Reserve out of Luke AFB, Ariz., and Olivares is a major in the Air Force’s Office of Special Investigations.

Bolstered by his CAP solo glider certificate, Heusser signed on as a member of the academy’s parachute team, the “Wings of Blue.” “Skydiving and aerial demonstrations were awesome experiences, fostering some special friendships and helping me stay motivated through the academic and general rigors of cadet life at the academy,” he said.

A CAREER

While the military makes duty assignments, airmen have some discretion in determining what those are. That was aptly demonstrated by what happened to Heusser once he graduated from the academy.

Not surprisingly, he had flight on his mind and was very happy to be sent to Mississippi’s Columbus AFB for Specialized Undergraduate Pilot Training. “I quickly received unfor-

tunate news, however,” he recalled. An oversight in previous flight medical evaluations rendered him unqualified to fly in the Air Force.

While he moved on to become a security forces officer supervising base law enforcement for F-117 aircraft at Holloman AFB, N.M., he appealed the Air Force’s decision, hoping he could return to flight training. But it seemed to be a battle he couldn’t win until, some years later, he was informed the Air Force had changed its medical policy, making him eligible once again for pilot training selection. With the full support of his superiors at Holloman, he was again selected to attend SUPT, this time at Laughlin AFB, Texas.

His delay in getting to SUPT proved beneficial, as he was a captain by then and was tapped to serve as class leader. “This was another leadership opportunity,” he said, “and it allowed me to select the KC-10 aircraft for my assignment after my training.”

Heusser went on to spend seven years flying KC-10s, used primarily for transport and refueling, while holding a variety of leadership positions at Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst, N.J., and later Travis AFB, Calif. During that time, he accumulated 102 combat missions and more than 2,000 flight hours in the KC-10 in deployments in support of operations Enduring Freedom, Iraqi Freedom, New Dawn and Odyssey Dawn.



As a CAP cadet Heusser became the 1,341st recipient of the Gen. Carl A. Spaatz Award, the highest cadet achievement, earned by only one-half of 1 percent of all cadets.

A DREAM JOB

Last year, Heusser was sent to Washington, D.C., to participate in the Air Force's Legislative Fellowship program. Assigned to the Pentagon, he completed legislative training through a Georgetown University program and now serves as a Secretary of the Air Force Legislative Fellow in the office of U.S. Rep. John Garamendi, D-Calif. "This is a great fit for me," Heusser said, "since Garamendi was elected for California's 3rd Congressional District, which is home to both Travis and Beale AFBs, where I once served."

In his current posting, which will last through December, Heusser assists in managing the congressman's defense and armed forces portfolios in addition to his foreign affairs and maritime interests. With Garamendi serving as a member of two subcommittees within the House Armed Services Committee and as the ranking member of the Coast Guard Subcommittee within the larger Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, Heusser staffs and attends all of the congressman's HASC hearings and meetings, as well as meetings with federal and defense agencies, interest groups and industry representatives.

"This is something I never even imagined," Heusser said. "In the relatively short time I've been working in Congressman Garamendi's office, I have had such direct exposure, even having the opportunity to provide input on defense and veterans' legislative proposals."



"Randy plays an integral role in our office," said U.S. Rep. John Garamendi, D-Calif., right, with Heusser. "He informs my work on the Armed Services Committee, evaluates legislative activity and strengthens our communication with the Department of Defense. His Air Force background, analytic thinking and hunger for knowledge help our office better serve our constituents, including the thousands of families in the Travis and Beale Air Force Base communities." Photo courtesy of Matt Kravit,

Office of U.S. Rep. John Garamendi



And despite time and distance, Heusser has a constant reminder of his CAP cadet days, because he regularly works with Lt. Col. Ian Dineson, a U.S. Senate liaison officer for the Air Force. Dineson was an Arizona Wing cadet at the same time as Heusser, and both participated in the International Air Cadet Exchange in 1997.

"It just goes to show you it's a small world," Heusser said. "While I couldn't begin to list all the CAP senior leaders and fellow cadets who positively influenced me, I am certain it was their leadership, mentorship and friendship that got me to where I am today, and I remain eternally grateful to CAP for all it has provided me." ▲

A Legislative Fellow, former CAP cadet Heusser, left, now finds himself in the business of welcoming CAP members visiting Capitol Hill as part of the organization's annual Legislative Day. Joining him are Lt. Col. Gregory Chase, adviser to the California Wing commander; U.S. Rep. John Garamendi, a Democrat representing California's 3rd District; and Lt. Col. Alan Ferguson, the California Wing's vice commander.

Photo by Lt. Col. Chris Roche, Maryland Wing