



(Photo by Darby Campbell, Middle Tennessee State University)

Col. James P. Isenhower III, left, director of Warrior and Family Support and special assistant to the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, talks with Brig. Gen. Christopher Burns, assistant vice commander, U.S. Special Operations Command, Washington Office, and Lt. Gen. William "Bill" Phillips, military deputy and director, U.S. Army Acquisition Corps, after the spring commissioning ceremony 9 May 2014 in the Tom H. Jackson Building's Cantrell Hall at Middle Tennessee State University in Murfreesboro, Tenn.

# Assignment: Special Assistant to the Commander

Col. Thomas P. Galvin, U.S. Army, Retired

If you are or will be serving (especially for the first time) in a higher headquarters—such as service component command, combatant command, service staff, or joint staff—it is likely that you will be assigned to or collaborating with something called a *commander's action group* (CAG). These are also known as *commander's initiatives groups*, *commander's special studies groups*, or *special assistants groups*. If you are

assigned to one, you may carry the duty title of *special assistant* (SA), and your duty description will likely be broad and vague. Additionally, if you are like most first-timers in a CAG, you probably will have heard little to nothing about them in prior assignments.

Yet, in today's military, CAGs are very common and play important roles in the handling of routine informational needs of senior military leaders. Once



Listen as Col. Thomas P. Galvin, U.S. Army, retired, discusses his experiences as a special assistant to the commander.

only associated with four-star headquarters, these ad hoc teams have proliferated down to staff directors at three- and two-star-officer level or equivalent civilian levels in response to requirements. In my observations, senior field grade officers are frequently called upon to join CAGs without a clear understanding of what the role entails beyond being ready to provide “whatever the boss needs.”<sup>1</sup> Moreover, some SAs are transients, temporarily assigned for a year or less to gain exposure to the senior leadership environment while awaiting their next assignment, potentially as battalion or brigade commanders. Thus, many SAs learn enough about their particular responsibilities to succeed but do not always gain the broader perspective of what capabilities CAGs can offer to Army leaders.

I served as an SA to various commanders of service component, joint, and combined commands for 10 years, and led action groups for five of those years. Those assignments were tremendously rewarding and allowed me to see first-hand how several general officers and equivalent-level civilians perceived their environment, engaged with stakeholders, made decisions, formulated and communicated their vision, and ultimately accomplished their missions (with varied levels of success). It was eye-opening how differently each commander operated, including the degree to which things at the senior levels got done through informal means—for instance, through collaboration and negotiation—rather than formally through the military bureaucracy.

Performing the duties of an SA can sometimes have the feel of walking on eggshells. The job has a learning curve that is uncomfortably steep. Tasks like speechwriting, ghostwriting, special projects, and internal consulting are generally highly sensitive and fraught with procedural and cultural challenges that could put unwary SAs in untenable positions within the headquarters. Completing assigned tasks is always the easy part. The hard part is ensuring that CAGs remain helpful conduits of information and are effective in getting nonroutine things done between staffs and leadership while not being viewed as duplicating staff responsibilities and roles.

The purpose of this article is to introduce and summarize four common duties that SAs perform. These are, based on my experiences as a speechwriter, ghostwriter, special projects officer, internal consultant, and commander’s archivist. I offer these perspectives for both SAs and the leaders they will serve. I present these views

knowing the sensitivities involved in even defining the roles of CAGs and SAs, but I have become convinced that it is better to be more transparent about the expectations rather than less.<sup>2</sup> After all, CAGs are emerging as commonplace within U.S. military organizations.

## Special Assistant as Speechwriter

When asked by nonmilitary people what I did as an SA, I usually responded “speechwriter,” as it is the one duty that requires the least amount of explanation. Commanders spend a lot of time communicating orally and in writing with a wide range of internal and external stakeholders through speeches, papers, presentations, and video (such as scripted messages for American Forces Network spots). Only a portion of these engagements fall into the purview of public affairs, hence speechwriters tend to be needed.

Very little in the way of one’s standard career path prepares officers to serve in the capacity of speechwriter. The style of writing is different—from technical to narrative—but that is largely a matter of skill and practice, a competency that can be developed and improved. Being successful as a military speechwriter involves being able to write in the voice of the commander. Consequently, a relationship must exist between the leader and the speechwriter that fosters success.

**Relationships should be direct, and empathy is critical.** A successful speechwriter develops and sustains a strong and direct one-on-one relationship with his or her senior leader built on empathy, which is defined as “the action of understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to, and vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts, and experience of another.”<sup>3</sup> The SA and leader must be synchronized with each other if the former is to be effective in providing speeches and products that are in the voice of the latter. Empathy, however, is fleeting and takes effort to sustain. Senior leaders have busy schedules and cannot always bring their SAs along. Any time that my senior leader and I were incommunicado for a couple days, I found myself having to catch up with the boss’s thinking, which invariably needed to be incorporated into an upcoming important speech. Thus, building trust and demonstrating success in early assignments is important.

**No product is final until delivered.** Action officers prefer to be proactive and complete tasks through iterative engagements with their supervisors.





(Photo by Petty Officer 1st Class Daniel P. Lapiere, U.S. Africa Command)

Foreign liaison officers from Combined Joint Task Force–Horn of Africa listen to a command brief presented by Col. Thomas Galvin, director of the Commander's Action Group for U.S. Africa Command, at a conference for foreign liaison officers 27 January 2009 at the Africa Command headquarters in Stuttgart, Germany.

For example, in-progress reviews clarify tasks so the action officer can efficiently address a requirement and assume it is completed when passed up the chain. As a speechwriter, however, there were several occasions where the first time my commander was able to review a speech or presentation was in the car on the way to the event, and sometimes that meant my having to make edits and reprint the document minutes before delivery. At one event in a foreign country, I was editing slides during dinner for a post-dinner presentation. Why? The boss had just been informed about something that altered part of his core message. The presentation had to change. While this was an extreme case, it was common practice to incorporate news items or the most recent remarks by the secretary of defense, chairman, or Army chief of staff at the last minute. The lesson learned is to be ready by thinking through such contingencies in advance and

to always be on the lookout for new, relevant information that adds value to the communication.

**Exercise care in injecting yourself into the product.** One fellow SA wanted to insert Latin phrases to make our commander sound more erudite. He was routinely disappointed when the products returned from the boss with those words obliterated by red pen. Empathy in speechwriting means both appreciating the needs and communication styles of the leader and holding back one's own preferences.

The key measure of success is the comfort level that the speaker projects, not just the successful delivery of the message. The introduction of words or phrases that speakers would not ordinarily say can be distracting and seem inauthentic. On the other hand, speechwriters are communications advisors, and good ones who have developed the proper rapport and empathy with the commander

are often given freedom to suggest effective ways to communicate difficult, controversial, or complex points, whether orally or in written products, such as journal articles.

**The organization is the client, not the commander.** This is an important philosophical point that comes from watching some SAs go about this task the wrong way. Perhaps, they developed especially pretty or elaborate PowerPoint presentations and designs for the commander's use only or wrote speeches that, if spoken, would have been self-promoting for the commander (and indirectly the SA).

However, those SAs ignored the needs of the organization. Successful SAs know that once the commander has finished speaking, no matter to which audience, the staff must act on the message. The audience and the headquarters staff will each want the slides, so the slides and associated notes pages must be self-explanatory.

## Special Assistant as Special Projects Officer

I served in several CAGs where we were tasked to lead some form of strategic review or change effort for the headquarters. The advantage of having CAGs is their ability to operate outside of the normal all-consuming staff churn to tackle tough challenges and organizational needs that are otherwise overcome by ordinary events. CAGs can serve as internal think tanks, conducting important or independent research on complex topics that fall outside the staff's jurisdiction or exceed the abilities of the staff to tackle, or as special projects teams, free to explore creative and innovative solutions to current or future challenges.

Most projects I worked on involved implementing and managing organizational change. Change is a major part of organizational life, and keeping pace with the ever-changing strategic environment is hard. Commanders often look to their CAGs to conduct research and contribute ideas that may spur redesign of processes, systems, and structures in their commands. Depending on the task, these can include preparing analytical white papers, studying emerging doctrine, developing concepts, contributing to staff planning, preparing senior leader communications, and engaging with subject matter experts outside the military, such as those in academia and think tanks. Such projects can

be interesting and professionally rewarding, although they can also be demanding and frustrating at times, especially if a study must be close-hold and nonreleasable due to sensitivities.

CAGs may also be involved if a headquarters employs an outside consultant (from within the Department of Defense, other government agency, academia, or private enterprise) to assist with a wide-scale transformation effort. SAs may participate in focus groups or project teams facilitated by the consultant. They may also serve as the contracting officer's technical representative on behalf of the command to monitor contract performance and render assistance to the consultant in accordance with the contract. I served twice in this capacity, and I found the experiences in contracting processes and addressing issues useful in subsequent assignments.

The research and analysis that CAGs conduct can also contribute to the military's professional knowledge base through journal articles and other scholarly activity. During their tenure, some SAs are required by their CAGs to publish at least one independent journal article (or internal white paper if the subject matter is considered for official use only) in a joint or service publication. Getting something published is a very effective way to build critical and creative thinking skills, which are invaluable as SAs progress in their military careers.

## Special Assistant as Internal Consultant

Complexity and high operating tempo can mean that military organizations do not have the opportunity or the ability to focus energy for needed introspection. Is the organization doing things right? Is the organization doing the right things? What is being missed? To answer these questions for limited purposes or when budgets are tight, leaders may turn to their CAGs and employ SAs as internal consultants. It is an interesting role that places heavy demands on one's interpersonal skills.

An internal consultant investigates matters within one's own organization for the purposes of advising leadership.<sup>4</sup> Within the military, there are standing internal consultants chartered with advising the commander on specific matters—these include the inspector general (for matters of regulatory compliance and adherence to ethical



standards), staff judge advocate (for legal matters), and command sergeant major (for enlisted matters). However, anyone on the staff is eligible to pursue an inquiry from the leadership on other matters of mission performance. It is not uncommon to see CAGs tasked to conduct inquiries among directors or senior members when the matter was sensitive but staff meetings were impractical. For example, my commander once tasked me to quietly poll directors for their views on prioritizing transformational efforts and then to provide a one-page summary of ideas.

Because of the sensitivities involved, internal consultants must often exercise care, as playing the role may impact the SAs efficacy afterward.<sup>5</sup> Building trust is key because ultimately, if deficiencies are found, it is incumbent on the consultant to report them, but if possible to do so in a way that allows the staff to take action first. While assigned to a CAG within a combined (multinational) headquarters, I was asked to look into an internal communication issue among the staff, and it turned out to be a significant problem with a root cause.

I found a way to answer my commander's inquiry while also allowing the staff members to address the issue on their own so no one was on the defensive. As a result, I found it easier to engage with the staff on subsequent special projects.

## Special Assistant as Commander's Archivist

The commander's administrative team may handle the filing of hard copies of everything the boss has signed, but the SAs often get involved in all other collection, archiving, and retrieval of the commander's professional activities. Given that many commanders sustain wide professional networks and often have limited time to reflect or prepare their own journals, they may rely heavily on others to assist. Roles of SAs often include taking notes, writing memoranda, transcribing oral remarks, preparing journals, and maintaining databases. However, the manner in which these are



(Photo by Lisa Ferdinando, Defense Media Activity)

Brig. Gen. Michael E. Bobeck, special assistant to the director, Army National Guard, discusses civil support and consequence management 14 January 2013 during the Association of the United States Army Aviation Symposium in Arlington, Va.

done is dependent on the personal needs and habits of the commander.

Some leaders do not mind large entourages and, therefore, SAs are likely to be in the room to take notes, which simplifies things. Some others, however, prefer a lot more privacy and will restrict note taking or allow only an aide-de-camp in the room during meetings, which means SAs must work closely with the aide or executive officer to gather the needed information. The expectation is that whatever archives are built will be available and reasonably accurate so the commander can use them to recall past events and help him or her prepare for meetings with stakeholders whose last contact was months (or even years) earlier.

## Tips and Cautions

Each CAG is different because each commander, organization, and strategic context is different. Successful SAs find ways to apply their unique talents and experiences, while the less successful find the dynamics of the role uncomfortable. On the other hand, not all CAGs are properly utilized. The following are some questions and related tips for consideration if you have an option to join a CAG.

**How is the CAG's relationship with the chief of staff (or equivalent)?** CAGs may work for the commander and closely with the executive officer and aide-de-camp, but to accomplish the mission, they depend greatly on

solid working relationships with the headquarters staff. Strong relationships with the chief of staff provides better access to feeder input for commander products and better chances of the commander's communications promulgating through the organization.

**What roles do the SAs tend to play?** In addition to determining how well your strengths align with the activities the CAG performs, these roles also determine the CAG's primary contacts within the staff. If a CAG is being used as primarily as a speechwriting team, then how strong is the relationship with the public affairs officer? If special projects, then what is the relationship with the division chiefs and action officers in the C/J/G-3, 5, or 8 (general staff)?

If internal consultant, which would be less common, then what is the role of the staff judge advocate, inspector general, or deputy chief of staff? If archivist, then what are the expectations of the executive officer and aide-de-camp? If these working relationships are strong, then SA efforts are much more likely to be productive and rewarding.

**Is the CAG being used as a shadow staff?** I am happy to say that this became far less common in my later years in CAGs but was more prevalent a decade earlier and is something worth watching out for. If a CAG is being used to routinely vet staff products (that is, being inserted as a gatekeeper between the staff and commander) or duplicate staff actions, that is a CAG to avoid. Usually, checking into the relationship between the CAG and key

staff members will give indicators that this is occurring, but not always.

A corollary question is who does the CAG work for? What I said earlier about speechwriting applies across all CAG functions: the organization is who the CAG serves—and not just the commander. If the CAG is singularly focused on the commander to the exclusion of the rest of the headquarters, then you should look for signs of strain between the CAG and the staff. If so, building relationships with the staff becomes an important early task.

## Tough but Rewarding Duty

Duty as an SA is challenging and rewarding. It provides a great opportunity to understand broad organizational dynamics and gain insights into the world of strategic leadership. It can offer opportunities to pursue important creative and innovative projects, aid in transformation efforts, and help organizations address difficult challenges.

It is also delicate, a duty that requires well-honed interpersonal skills and professional judgment to work in some of the sensitive matters addressed at the senior levels, and no two general officers utilize their SAs the same way. From my personal and professional experience, it is one of the most interesting and impactful assignments that an officer can take. ■

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## Notes

1. When I joined my first commander's action group in 2000 and asked the chief what the duties entailed, these four words were the initial response.

2. Kevin Baron, "Inside the CAG: Dempsey's Inner Circle," *ForeignPolicy.com*, 12 October 2012, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2012/10/12/inside-the-cag-dempseys-inner-circle/> (accessed 3 February 2015).

3. Merriam-Webster Online, s.v. "empathy," <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/empathy> (accessed 16 January 2014).

4. Harry Levinson, *Organizational Assessment: A Step-by-Step Guide to Effective Consulting*, 1st ed. (Washington DC: American Psychological Association, 2002), 37-39. The author provides a theoretical perspective on internal consultants.

5. Ibid.