

## Ep. 8.1: Col. Mark Estlund

Welcome to Sword and Shield, the official podcast of the 960<sup>th</sup> Cyberspace Wing. Join us for insight, knowledge, mentorship and some fun, as we discuss relevant topics in and around our wing. Please understand that the views expressed in this podcast are not necessarily the views of the U. S. Air Force, nor the Air Force Reserve, and no endorsement of any particular person or business is ever intended. (Light music)

Awesome. Welcome to another episode of the Sword and Shield today, this is Chief Master Sgt. Howard, 960th Cyberspace Operations Group Superintendent and today with me I have-- - Colonel Mark Estlund, the Incoming Commander of the 960th Cyberspace Operations Group. - Awesome, welcome aboard, sir. I look forward to having you as part of the group in leading us forward. What is hoping for was, could you give us a little bit of insight about your trek through the Air Force? - Sure. So I went to school at the University of Minnesota, up in Minneapolis and went through the ROTC program there. And that's where I got my commission. My first duty station was at Ellsworth Air Force Base as a brand new Second Lieutenant, where I start off in Base Visual Information and then transitioned into the WICP, the Wing Initial Communication Package, as the Deputy Flight Commander for the mission systems flight, which was a great opportunity in the Comm world. From there, I was fortunate enough to get an assignment to Ramstein Air Airbase in Germany. Started off as an exec for the Logistics Group and then transitioned over to the 86th Comm Squadron. There I got my first real leadership opportunity as the Telecommunication Systems Flight Commander, which was the largest telephone switch in Europe for military. Happened be assigned with a young Airman, Howard. (Howard laughs) Played soccer with him as we've we remember now. After Ramstein, which was a great assignment, I went to the National Capital Region and I was at the National Reconnaissance Office, doing primarily Enterprise Systems Management, making sure that there are printers and computers in all the desks at the NRO. From there, I was fortunate enough to get a school slot and went to the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, California, which was a wonderful experience. Got a Master's degree in Computer Science. After that, took off for Air Force Space at us Strategic Command, where I was a program manager for the MCCC, the Mobile Command And Control Center, which was part of the part of our Nuclear Command And Control System. And that point, I transitioned out of active duty in 2007 and joined the Air Force Reserve. I started off with DIA, Defense Intelligence Agency, and I was there for a couple years. And in 2013, Colonel Terry called me up and asked me if I wanted to take command of the 610th Information Operations Flight, which then was re-designated the 960th Network Operations flight, I'm sorry, 960th Network Warfare Flight. So that was when I came into the Wing for the first time. We were the CyOG back then. And so I was very fortunate to be part of the initial standup of the CyOG Commanded the 960th Network Warfare Flight for four and a half years. And then I was fortunate enough to get promoted. Went back to USSTRATCOM as a Battle Watch Commander. And most recently I've

been on orders supporting the J3, the Operations Director as their Chief of Staff. And now I'm back. And so as a civilian, I'm also employed at USSTRATCOM, conducting requirements management for the Nuclear Command Control System. So we look at the big nuclear command and control enterprise, understand where the gaps are, work their plans and the budget submissions and then track the projects to keep that system alive and healthy. I'm married to my wife Christie for the last almost 25 years. And we have three kids Brynn, who's 22, Haley, who's 18 and Sam, who's 17. And that's a quick synopsis of who I am and where I've been. - Awesome, sir, know I really appreciate it, right. One of the things that we always look towards our leaders is kind of what that experience they have, where they've been, where they're coming from. And that leads me to my first question. Being part of what was the CyOG, as the Network Warfare Flight Commander, to now being the Commander Of The Cyber Operations Group under a wing, coming in the door, what are some of the first things that you noticed that are different from what we were to what we are today? - I would just start with evolution. I mean, I heard Colonel Jones say this in a podcast and Colonel Terry, who is the initial CyOG commander used to say this all time as, "We're flying the plane while we're building." And those early days, it really was it... Everybody was trying to figure out how do we make this thing happen? How do we create this organization and get it off and running and be an asset to the bigger Air Force and as I've watched from a distance, the five years that I was with the group, and then now they're watching as a distance, just seeing the steps that the Wing has taken, specifically under Colonel Jones, the last couple of years to really develop into a Wing and the functions that you see in a Wing and folks trying to get out there and be a force multiplier for active duty. That's the biggest thing I've seen. - Okay, yeah, I mean and I'd like to kind of tap into that one word you use is evolution, right? So now we already date ourselves a little bit, but going back to my Rammstein days where both of us were base CAM and then we work some expeditionary CAM as well, but it was CAM, right? And now today, we have the moniker of cyber. I was wondering if you could kind of tell me what you thought of that transition from CAM to cyber, what that's kind of looked like and maybe where you see that heading. - Yeah, I know for me personally, so when I was in college, I mean, I had a soft undergraduate degree and they told me I was gonna be a CAM officer. I was like, "I don't even know what that is." And I got to the base and in really, it was we were part of the Mission Support Group. We're putting computers on desks, we're building antenna fields, we're keeping the LMRs running. But it was all in support of the Flying Operations. It was all about to get the airplanes taking off, help them with their scheduling, very repair oriented and reactive, whereas as we become Cyber Operations, the key word there is operations. We are a weapon system, we are a domain that we can execute operations on. And so that's really, evolution is a great word. We used to be just, "How do I help the operators do their job?" And now it's okay, "I am an operator, I am a weapon system, I can affect the outcome of a situation." And that's really the evolution that I've seen over the last 25 years. - Right, that I fully agree sir, right there. So we went from CAM, being a support function, right, and that's really what it was. When we were working in Ramstein, we worked digital European backbone, we worked the phone switch when any contingency happened out there, and any of that AR that we were responsible for,

everything reached back through us to get back to CONUS. And now when we look at Cyber Operations, and what that looks like, right now, that key keyword that you hit, many times there was operations, operations. So the mindset instantly has to change, right. So part of that evolution is where do we focus on? Or where do we look? We're no longer a support function, but we are that that leading edge of the sphere, in some cases, the tip of the spear, right. As we go through the units, you'll see that we will have scores, we'll have weapon systems, a lot of individuals sit in this console. So we have our Airmen in the day or every day when they come to that console. So we're actually fighting as a warfighter compared to just being that support. With that, kind of want to lead to, now that you're taking the seat, what are some of the things that you are looking for as we start this new adventure with you at the helm? - Going back to the evolution, we need to continue to evolve. I mean, even Reg AF Active Duty folks are still trying to find a way to use cyber effectively. And so we're going to follow that suit. So it's not only find our own way to operationalize and affect the battle space, it's how do we team up with Reg AF, how do we become a force multiplier, I think that's really where I'm gonna really try and build relationships with the active duty cyber wings, with Cyber Command, I mentioned I work at USSTRATCOM as a civilian, Cyber Command was under STRATCOM. And we still see those conversations of how do we build cyber into our operations plans? And how do we use cyber to affect the outcomes of our National agendas and our National interests? And so if I can, start working through making us effectively operational, not just operational, but plugging us into the bigger war effort, that would be where I would hope to achieve some success. - Sure, that was some points right there. I think that quite often, we still have a lot of outsiders that look at us more of that support function versus operations, so how do we get our foot in the door and really develop that relationship at STRATCOM, like any other CCO COMMs and then even at the Wing and unit level to make sure that a, cyber is prevalent, cyber is key to any of the plans that we talked about. And then on top of that, how do as the reserves kind of fit in that place, right. So looking at right now, it seems like it's just inherent, but they have their own problems, then we add that slice that we have reserved associate units. Is there any words of advice of how do we build those relationships at that unit level being a previous unit commander? - Yeah, for me it was forcing myself into a room and requiring my fellow commanders to have an audience with me and expressing them. "We want to be part of the fight, we want to be relevant and be a force provider for you." And then you have to show that you're capable of doing so. So you've to walk the walk, and then you've to talk to talk, then you have to walk the walk. And if you can get in those doors, tell them what you can provide. Put some of your shiny stars out on their ops floors to participate with them and they see, "Wow, these guys actually know what they're doing." They become more receptive. "Okay, now how do we plug them in a in a bigger capacity?" And so definitely that's going to be the conversations with the squadrons going forward, is what are your relationships with your active duty partners? How are you providing them manpower or resources to show how good we really are, and then taking advantage of that. - Yes, sir, and then going with that leadership philosophy, what are some of your philosophy as a commander? - A couple things that I try to practice and I try to preach is, number one is teamwork. I

know for myself, I'm never gonna be the smartest guy in the room, so I really rely heavily on my peers, my subordinates and in my leadership. So we got to work together. There's opportunities recognize folks as individuals, but we don't get anywhere if we don't do it together. So, teamwork is very significant to me. Lead by example. And that is not just for Squadron commanders and superintendents. Everybody has a leadership role and sometimes leadership is by followership. But you need to show folks that you're accountable, that you're going to work hard, and you're doing the right thing even when people aren't watching. But so lead by example. Professionalism is very important to me. When you're in office and the doors closed, you can be a little looser, but especially when we are trying to show that Air Force Reserve is a product that active duty should consume, we need to show them the word top notch. And so whether you're a civilian, a TR, an IMA, which we don't have or an AGR, we should be showing that we are really good at what we do. We're professionals, and we're not just here, just because we're trying to get a couple points towards our 20 year, we're here to do an operation. We're here to push Air Force Reserve going forward. And then I guess, last thing is, folks need to lean forward. We're not going to get anywhere, if we're just status quo. So keep pushing the envelope, because that's why the wing is where it is. As folks behind us it pushed the envelope to make us a Wing. And that needs to continue to happen. We need to continue to evolve. So that we can be a an impact on the larger Air Force and the Department of Defense. - Yes, and I think that, we talked about that evolution and we talked about that leadership philosophy as the reserves has evolved. We used to be strategic, right. So back in the day, it was much more strategic. I think he had a good point there about people just coming to get here for points, and then how do we present ourselves as we become more of an operational reserve. The importance of the Reserve has made itself much more prevalent. I didn't know if you could speak to a little bit more of your perspective on that and what it looks like from an operational perspective, knowing that we have the constraints with TRs and we have the constraints with the reserves, and the baggage that we bring in that conversation and make that relationship better to be a much more readily resourced reserve. - Yeah, that's a really delicate balance. There's a place or the traditional reserve of old where we're focusing on getting our training squatter away, getting our IMR square away, making sure that when the flag goes up, we can come in and backfill. But as we discussed before, right now, there's way more requirements than there are resources. And so bigger force in the Department Defense really are relying on us to be a poor force provider. And so going forward, we have to be very honest with our folks about what our expectations are. If I hadn't mentioned before, expectation management is a big thing for me. I like to let people know what I expect of them so that they can plan accordingly. And with our new folks coming into the reserves, specifically into a Cyber Operations Group, highlighting the word "operations," they need to be ready to perform, and we should have those conversations honestly with them. With that it's our responsibility as leaders to find what is that balance and how do we make sure that they can serve in the reserves in a manner which allows them to be flexible with their civilian employers, allows them to family life, but also has them being operational piece of the United States Air Force. So it's a really, really challenging conversation. Some of

the older folks like you and I, they grew up on the old reserves, but it's more of an operational piece of the Air force now and we need to be very transparent about what our expectations are. And then it's our us as leadership's to try and formulate the right solution. So you can still serve, but you still have that flexibility of being a reservist. - All right, and the uniqueness that you have, compared to some of the other staff is that, you were a TR leader, right. So, as a TR leader, in a leadership role, a very significant leadership role, balancing that civilian career, that family life in it and being that TR leader, are there any tricks of the trade the two forms of how to balance that out or any kind of advice that you could give to other TR out there that are trying to work their way to those leadership roles? - So one of one of the things I hit on earlier was teamwork. So Lieutenant Colonel Whitehead and Chief Howard, full time guys allow me to be a TR leader. I rely heavily on them, we'll rely heavily on them to kind of keep the boat going in the right direction. And then being able to give some vector-checks here and there when I'm not in status. But the reality is, as well, if you're going to be a leader, you have to understand that you're always a leader, even though you're only going to be in status a short time each month. But you really do, you have to lean heavily on your folks who are full timers, whether you're an art or an AGR. And then you have to be very direct on what you want. Going back to expectation management. But it's a challenging balance. But if you care about the Air Force Reserve and you care about continuing to evolve, you find a way to make it work, but it's important to just have a balanced, that's for sure. - Right, and I know when I'm speaking to our enlisted leadership, I like to peel back the onion, we're not here for the pay, right? Obviously, there's going to be a certain love for the labor that we put into this. The fact that, being a previous TR, and I'm sure you could echo this, that there's going to be far more demands on you than you have time, doesn't matter what status you're in. But how do we find that balance, and then also drive that to the resiliency of your family, resiliency of yourself? And then how do I continue to still feel like I'm being effective as a TR? And what does that look like? Sometimes they get a little bit more here, a little less there, but do you have any kind of words of advice as far as ways to keep that resiliency going as a TR leader? - So definitely good communication is going to be really important. You need to let your teammates, whether it's your supervisors or subordinates understand some of the challenges or things you have going on. So they can either help carry the load for you, or they can give more to you to help move things along. But resiliency is important. You gotta you gotta decompress every now and then. Because a lot of us, if we're a TR and we're on a drill weekend, you're going 14 days straight. And so you have to make sure that you've taken time, you're taking care of your family, first and foremost, because if you're not watching out for your family, your career is going to be in jeopardy very quickly. But then going back to what I said before, keep in touch with your teammates. Let them know whether you need help or how you can help. And that will help their resiliency as well as keep you going on the right page. - Right, and then us as leadership always looking at our Airmen and making sure we're engaged with them on a regular basis, and helping them see some of those signs of stumbling, right. I know that there's days that my wingman from the staff to leadership will ask you, "How are you doing, everything good? You're looking a little rough today." I mean, I know that certain people called me a couple

times, "Hello Chief, (mumbles), right." Because you can get into that, so yes, sir. But it is one of those hard things to what the demand of an Operational Reserve is. And then on top of that, balancing all those other pieces of that pie that we have, right? - Yeah, that's the challenge. And that's, hopefully, the areas where we'll definitely come together and find the right solutions to make sure that all of our wingmen have that balance squared away. - Awesome, sir. Well, I know that your time is very valuable. But I want to give you a one more chance to kind of any parting words or words of wisdom that you might have to the 960th Cyber Wing out there now in your group. - I guess simply put, I'm really excited to be back in the wing. It was a great experience for me when I was at the 960th Network Warfare Flight, now the 52nd. And I really look forward to getting back into this team, and seeing the continued evolution and watching the successes of all the great members of this team. And it's going to be it's going to be a good time. So I'm looking forward to being here, thanks. - Awesome, thank you, sir. And to the gladiators out there, thank you for all you do. Thank you for your commitment to your country. Thank you did a commitment to the Air Force and thank you to your commitment to us as fellow Airmen, so I hope you have a great day. (Upbeat music)