

Ep. 37: We're in this together

Welcome to Sword and Shield, the official podcast of the 960th 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)

[Rick] Welcome to the Sword and Shield Podcast. I'm Colonel Rick Erredge, 960th Cyberspace Wing Commander. - [Howard] And I'm a Chief Master Sergeant Chris Howard, Superintendent 960th COG. - [Rick] Welcome, chief. - [Howard] Good to see you, sir. It's been a rough week. - [Rick] It's been a really rough week, absolutely. I know, we're looking at same here too and so all of us have had different types of rough weeks and some worse than others. - [Howard] Definitely. I mean, when you look at the 960th as a whole, we've had at least a two to three bases, just get slammed with the winter weather that was outside of the norm and then infrastructure issues here at JBSA, right? We had to get down to emergency crews only at one point. It was definitely something you wouldn't expect in Texas. I left Colorado for a reason and then I come down here and yeah, it's been crazy, sir. - [Rick] We keep saying the same thing to people, you're from Minnesota, this is easy. I'm like, no, it doesn't make it any easier. I left there because I wanted better weather. - [Howard] Right. Well, the cold wasn't so bad. You get prepared and you know how to drive in it but when the infrastructure itself isn't built to hold it and then you start getting dealt a couple of other blows like road conditions because they're just not prepared for it or it just becomes overwhelming quite quickly. Same thing with the water and the power. It all adds up real quick. - [Rick] Yeah. You find some things, you know, I'd never really thought about growing in Minnesota my whole life. We never had water issues when we had cold weather, like this something that we learned, I guess two generations before that. In Texas, they don't have a need to do that. - [Howard] Right. Definitely. - [Rick] And so you start thinking about the cascading effects and how bad it gets and you know, there's still people that are still struggling. We had some friends up in Austin that just got power back today. That's six days without power and they still don't have water. - [Howard] Right. - [Rick] And for native Texans, their people, - [Howard] It's rough. - [Rick] It's rough. So I started thinking about, man, I've been reflecting this week about all the things that has been going on at least since the time I took command. And when I went to the wing commander training, they said, "You will get your opportunity to lead in crisis." It's like we talked about crisis, but it was right before COVID when I went to the training and they talked about through the lens of kind of a military buildup for some sort of extreme event, right? - [Howard] Right. - [Rick] It wasn't about a pandemic, wasn't about extreme weather or storms, wasn't about this extremism or polarizing politics that have started to shape kind of where we are right now in the world. - [Howard] Right. And it definitely, you know, I know we've talked about resiliency. It definitely, those items alone, you know, when taken out

one by one, if it was just one and then if it was just this one or just that one. I think that most people would just bounce back quite quickly, right? When we start putting into the fact that we're going on close to a year with COVID restrictions that huge paradigm shift. Then we throw in the politics, the extremism, and then other issues - [Rick] Racial inequality. - [Howard] Yes, sir. - [Rick] I mean, it seems like it's a time and just change, right? - [Howard] Right. - [Rick] New administration, new chief of staff, new Chief Messer into the air force. - [Howard] Yes. - [Rick] All good things can come out of it but I think, it's just piling on, like you said of just over and over and over again and I think the uncertainty around funding, right? And that's always been a constant but it doesn't mean it's easier to deal with all the time. - [Howard] No. And then when that all comes together and puts on top of that, what's going to be the cherry or what's going to be the straw that breaks the camel's back, right? - [Rick] Yeah, and I think that's what we gotta think a lot about of what is and for somebody it's probably different than somebody else. - [Howard] Right. - [Rick] And I made the comment last week to my wife. Like I said, "Hey, so it's been just about a year "with this COVID thing." "I think I'm finally kind of just comfortable" "with what we're doing now." "I'm comfortable in myself." "Not necessarily comfortable what to do in other people." - [Howard] Good point, right? You found probably that balance and the next piece will add its weight or you'll be able to bounce it back. It's just now how do we lead through this problem with our airmen, right? How do we get them to be in that same safe space, how do we navigate that? - [Rick] Yeah, and not that I like it but you just find ways to kind of deal with it and put it in your mind and like kinda march on. Seems like two weeks ago now, it probably was two weeks ago, we were talking to Major Dumara. - [Howard] Right. - [Rick] And I'm out in the hallway here in the building and you know, she's always good for challenging us. - [Howard] Yes - [Rick] and asking really tough questions and I appreciate that about her. We've had a couple other people that said, Hey, everything's not always rosy. It's not rainbows and unicorns all the time even though we'd like it to be. - [Howard] Yes. - [Rick] Like, we should talk about some of these really hard things. And so I think this with everything kind of pile on it's probably a good time for us to just kind of talk about what kind of things we're thinking about and the struggles that kinda you and I go through together. And then individually, the things that we're thinking about and the things that kind of are on our minds all the time. - [Howard] Great. And I think also they were looking for some individual skills that we could give them so they could help use those and maybe get them through those processes. - [Rick] Yeah. So, you know, I'm a closet journaler. And so I found myself journaling or writing more than normal, over probably the past six months. And that has helped me as far as individual coping skill is just put my words down on paper, I don't worry about it making sense. And I'm not actually writing, I'm typing. And so I just put it in a document and like when I go on throughout the day, like, Hey man, this is really bugging me. I'll write a note in my schedule, events to do and then usually on the weekend then I sit down and it's quiet and just start banging away. And so the last thing I wrote about was this concept of extremism. - [Howard] Okay - [Rick] And what I got to the end was I usually kind of work my way through my thoughts and I go, okay, what would I do or how would I help? When I got to the end of this one, I said, "I don't know if there's good answer." We'll like, I had a hard time trying to

figure out how I need to talk about this with our organization and with our unit and all of our airmen - [Howard] I don't think it's one of those easy subjects, because I mean, it's like a couple of other subjects, you know with the racial equality and diversity and inclusion. It's where does the line really cut across, right? What's the right level of this or that to make it correct? With extremism, the word extremism alone is a no go, right? But where do we find the line of what is just being excited and trying to be patriotic to what is extreme or at what point are you pushing into anarchy and into other things? I think one thing that I found, think I shared with you was politics, right? We talked about right, we talked about left. We talked about it almost like it's a straight line. I go back to high school and my history teacher, Lunsford, he says, you know, the reality is, politics is a circle. So we talk about the center. It's really, you can say, it's on the top of the circle. And when we talk about extremism, left or right, they almost come together on the bottom of that circle, right? Because a lot of the same things are happening, right? So we're taking away from what our constitution is saying, we're taking away from civil, you know, law or taking away from those things that defines us as a nation and that's where that far right, far left portions come into play and it's really about taking away control of the individual voter and taking away the control of individuals as a whole, and then taking it beyond what is considered a lawful protest and even civil discussions so that we can actually move in a way that we as a nation need to move forward in, right? And taking that whole piece beyond what is necessary or what's right. It's really hard not to get wrapped up into some of these things, right? Whether you believe that x was right or y was incorrect or y was correct and everything. Reality is that as military members, it's a zero tolerance, right? What did our leadership tell us to do? It was a lawful order. You go forth and conquer, right? We had elections. They were done, decided, move on, right? These things that we have no control over. Did you do your piece as a citizen? Yes or no, right? - [Rick] There's always emotion, right? I mean, that's the hard part. When emotion gets attached to, you know, a train of thought or a line of thought, it can escalate really fast and that's what we don't want, we're not trying to escalate. But I think there's gotta be some way for us to have that civil discussion - [Howard] Yes - [Rick] And be able to talk about it. And then the concept of a dialogue, of a healthy dialogue, of any organization needs to understand each other and that where the inclusion comes. And so I try to frame this in my mind. So I ended up thinking about the concept of belonging 'cause the word extremism, like you said, it's hard to define, right? And everybody's going to try to find their own way and that's not helpful. So when I think about belonging in college, I took a gang class and the one thing I learned from that was that people join gangs and cults or if you would call them extremists or they joined any organization because they feel like they want. - [Howard] Right. - [Rick] Right? - [Howard] Yes. - [Rick] And so people are finding these opportunities with the technology that we have available to us. It's really easy to connect to people now. Where before, you know, you had to go down some shady back alley to figure out what this organization was doing in the garage to join it and then it was word of mouth, right? Now it grows so fast and can just jump in. I follow a couple of social media sites. I don't want to say for fun, but for knowledge and informing. And so I know we talked about it quite a bit. Sam and I talk about couple of them quite a bit, 'cause there's

always just trying to figure out what's going on. And I think there, I watch it and now we're looking at through the lens of this of people jumping to one side or the other on every topic. Like it's always one way or the other. It's all your ships terrible. Or this is a great thing and this is the best thing that's going on in the entire world. Like it's frustrating. - [Howard] It is, and I'm not trying to take a take away from it. It's almost silly, right? In the fact that when we get to these conversation pieces, it's black or it's white, right? - [Rick] No gray. - [Howard] No gray and this is where I find it funny is we live in the gray. Everybody lives in the gray, right? It comes to interpretation, it comes to a opinion, it comes to even how do I interpret these rules? We all live in the gray but for some reason, instead of having a discussion of understanding that there's space for both of these sides to be together, we have to take a hard stance. No, it has to be this way or that way. The harsh reality is, like in my family, right? My kids don't see the things I do the same way because, well, they didn't experience the same things growing up, right? - [Rick] Sure. - [Howard] And even me and my wife, we don't necessarily see everything the same way. But does that mean it has to be this way or that way? No. - [Rick] That's probably what keeps family together too, right? I mean, if everybody, you know, I talk about this a lot. You know, my dad votes one way and my mom, no matter what she feels like she votes opposite of him like she gotta counterbalance the force. - [Howard] Right. - [Rick] And they get along great and it works. And that's what I kind of think about bringing that kind of we can have a good robust debate. - [Howard] Right. - [Rick] Peaceful kind of a little bit of emotion attached but in a sense of to understand where are you coming from. - [Howard] Right. - [Rick] Understand what you're thinking so that we can be closer as a team - [Howard] I agree. I think that having those discussions and being able to open up and share that without a sense of reprisal or, you know, a judgment, I think that that would definitely do a lot of the smaller teams good, right? And kind of going back to your gang piece, I remember in basic training, we had some of these conversations in basic training of you're part of a new subculture, right? And it's really whether you defined it. - [Rick] Sure. - [Howard] And how did they define what culture was? What is subculture began with? And it comes to jargon, it comes to experiences, it comes to, you know, the sense of belonging. And that's one thing that I really like to highlight with our members is that you are part of something bigger, right? Don't get pulled out of this subculture. Don't be pulled away from this gang or however you want to put it, this family by dividing it, so black and white, right? You're part of this, right? You're going to be judged on your abilities, your attitude and your capability. And that's it. Anything else, you are part of the team bringing something to the table and you're valued. And that's what we push on our leadership across the board is you need to value those individuals. You need to value people bringing something new to the table. You have to include them into the conversation because, I don't know how to break it to you. You don't know everything, right? (Laughs) And that's something I know that when I was a young bullheaded, Staff Sergeant was hard sometimes that I thought I knew it. I was going forth and conquering, right? I was, you know, a stubborn senior airman and had a couple of NCOs and senior NCOs pull me aside and say, why are you thinking this way? Why are you thinking that way? Gave you some food for thought and really helped adjust. - [Rick] Just a different perspective, right? - [Howard] Right. - [Rick]

And I don't know if we've lost that over time or whether it's the art of experience. And so what I want to try to do is create opportunities for that to happen. We talked about using the small group discussion as a way to get people feel more comfortable about that and having those discussions. And I know certainly, I'm uncomfortable a lot of times talking about it but that just means we gotta talk about it more. - [Howard] Right. - [Rick] And it doesn't mean we talk about it till we get comfortable. That's not what I mean. What I mean is, have more opportunities to discuss it, and essentially helping people feel like they belong even if it's through, "Hey, you know, "Chris, you think differently than I do "but we're still in the same team. "It's still the same family. "I got you. "I know you got my back and I got yours." - [Howard] I agree. And I think that I'm actually looking forward to some of the changes that we're looking at, especially when we talk about UTCs and deployments. If we go back to that following deployment perspective maybe we'll get some of that common ground, right? The fact that we start spilling some of getting muddy in the same places, right? Doing some of the same things in having to endure the suck together. - [Rick] Yeah. That's really what we talk about that bonding. I remember recently watching a Ted talk by an individual I think, I believe his name was Younger. And he was talking about, you know, you talk to soldiers and airmen and marines and you talk to the deployed and they talk about missing war. And it really came down to because that they felt that someone had their back. I think that nowadays with the malign influence in all of these things that we've already identified that people don't feel like they can trust individuals, right? That they don't feel like they have their back. And going back to that Ted talk, it was really about, I know that my brothers and sisters in arms had my back. I want to be in a place where, yes, bullets are flying but I'm safe because this person's with me, that person's with me. They've got my back - [Rick] Interesting concept, right? Especially the Marines. They take that team to the ultimate and they have to, to rely on for their survival. And I've heard that from a number of people that when they retire, you know, the thing they miss most and the hardest thing about civilian life is just having, you know, the brother sisterhood. - [Howard] No, I totally can relate. I was in some small team, he was doing a lot of different deployments, doing different things and it really came down to I could trust this person or that person with my life. I can trust them with my wife. I can trust them with my money, my wallet, whatever. I trusted them wholeheartedly. And that's what made the day go by. And I think that's one of the challenges that as leaders that we have to develop that in these work centers, in these small teams and then help foster that culture within the 960th is if you call me, I'm gonna be there, right? Or if you need something, there's going to be someone that's going to step up and take care of you and help you out that we do really care and then we've got your back so that we can get past all of these things that are getting piled upon us. And that goes back to some of the things that you've discussed are, right, about making the phone calls, about getting engaged being that overbearing almost leadership, right? - [Rick] Intrusive leadership. - [Howard] Intrusive leadership. Because if we don't show individuals that we care and if we don't actually do what we say we're going to do, then no one's gonna trust, no one's gonna feel safe, and then we're just going to continue to watch as our culture erode. - [Rick] Yeah. I remember, you know, I think you said it well when I did some

exercise, right? Going to the aura and you plan for it, you plan for it, you 88 it. But I remember each time at the end of it gone. Man, I feel like we bonded and gelled as a team. I remember specifically as a captain I was the purse go dude and getting back after that, and the people that deployed with us, we had a different experience. And it was just different and it felt different and I'm really concerned about we don't necessarily have that same ability in our business in this wing other than combat calm - [Howard] Right. - [Rick] To really recreate that. We have to find different ways to create that bond. And so there's so many other threats out there that are chipping away at that and chipping away at that bond and making it really hard for us, internal, external threats. - [Howard] Yes. - [Rick] And so including stuff we're doing to ourselves, right? Just fresh side going on as well. We just have to do it with people, - [Howard] Yes. - [Rick] People with people. - [Howard] Great. So what I do, you talked about journaling. What I do is, I guess, more talk therapy, right? - [Rick] Sure. It's the same version of journaling, right? - [Howard] Yes - [Rick] just talking to people. - [Howard] I'm talking to those individuals that I trust. I'm talking to the individuals that I care about I'm reaching out and trying to make phone calls on a regular basis to individually make sure that they know that, that pathway is open and just to say hi. You know, some of my old friends I'll talk to. I'll talk to coworkers just to make sure that they're doing okay, just building that network so that network is strong so that when someone feels like they can't handle it alone, that they know that I've done it, and that they can come to me and I'm gonna provide the same kind of level of conversation and bonding with them. - [Rick] Yeah. And so you've demonstrated that and built their trust - [Howard] Hopefully. (Laughs) - [Rick] Through that way, right? That they're going to call when you need to and we just got to find ways to do that. You know, my way has been similar as well as that I like to listen, just give people an ear. And at the end of it, say, okay, what can I do? How can I help? And sometimes I just need you to listen. Like, I don't need you to do anything. - [Howard] Right? I just need to talk to somebody I'm like, cool. You know, that's what I'm here for. And there's other times where you know, I've had to be more forceful where I see somebody that's not generally being part of the team, try to pull them aside and say, "Hey, what's going on? "What are you feeling?" And then they kind of, "No, I'm fine." I'm like, "You just gotta try to dig." And that kind of helps me with my own personal resilience as well and gets me more engaged. And I try to demonstrate that so that other people know that, I'm there for them too. - [Howard] Right. Because words can be cheap or expensive depending on how you use them, right? It's easy to say, and it's harder to back up. That's where the expense comes in and if you don't back it up, it's the most expensive. - [Rick] Absolutely. And we don't want to have to cash in, - [Howard] Right. - [Rick] Anything if we lose people. - [Howard] I think Colonel Doug is able to coin that very well. I forget the words that he uses, but yes, words matter for one but then I think he has something with how much they actually cost you. - [Rick] Yeah. I've heard people talk about thinking about when you're talking to people building your bank account. Like every time you talk to somebody and you do something good, right, that's a debit, that's going to the bank account. And then when they need it, they can come cash it out. - [Howard] Right. - [Rick] Right? And do more debits and credits like, you need to give more than you take in order to keep people. And that's harder for some folks. And I

know in our business in cyber and Intel, a lot of folks like, you know, we live in secrets all the time, the business we do, and so a lot of us feel comfortable just kind of keeping it inside and not wanna talk about it but our job as leaders is to find those avenues to give people opportunities to reach out. - [Howard] The stigma, right? That it's not okay to talk. It's not okay not to be okay, right? The fact is that, everyone has a bad day and everybody needs something along the way. It's when you hide it, it's when you don't get the help, that leads you down decision pathways that don't work, which then lead to the problems, right? But if you need somebody, I think that everybody should know that it's open here and it's not going to affect you. - [Rick] I think that's what I've seen a huge change in my career is this openness, this discussion about innovation and picking people's brains and giving them problems. You know, when I grew up, it was empowering power, right? But it's usually like just get the work done, right? Empowerment was get the work done, but do it my way, right? - [Howard] It was in some ways, right. Empowerment was a buzzword, right? Mentorship was again, a buzzword. What we look at airman development, when we talk about team building, when we talking about that innovation piece, we're taking a buzzword and we're having to actually implement it, right? Because what we found is those buzzwords they're cheap to say, but they're expensive in regards to retention. Look at the retention rates, right? If we're not truly empowering them i.e. here's the target and letting individuals get there with a couple of right and left boundaries. What they feel is either micromanaged or left in the dark. So yeah, I empowered you, but I left you in the dark. So lays off very light leadership, right? Or if it's my way, my way, my way, now it's micromanagement. Really have to allow individuals to fail forward. Kind of gets after, you know, the accelerated change or lose. Even if we look at the ABCD piece that just came out from Reginald Brown, all of that gets after the fact that those words are not buzzwords. These are implementations we're going forward with and we want to see change, we want to see that diversity in thought we want to see everybody included because it's going to cost us in the long run. When we look at, you know, the great power competition if we are constantly handcuffing our risks to our ankle, we're going to fail. We have to get after those problems. - [Rick] Yeah. And I think, you know, it was really important from the diversity inclusion aspect I think about everybody, you know, thinks a certain way based on your experiences. - [Howard] Correct. - [Rick] Right? And we need more different experiences as part of a team. Than we need a bunch of, you know, and people always you know, they jumped to the, you know, and I think it's shocking that even when I walk in a room somewhere, you know, everybody looks like me. I remember standing next to Colonel Jones in one meeting and she's like, "Look around the room." She like, "I'm the only woman in here." I'm like, "Wow." Like again, I had never thought of in that aspect. My mind is thinking about business and operations. And so I think a lot about, Hey, bring in those other people around us, getting them on board, and we really wanna make sure that we're giving them opportunities to voice because in our business, right, I wanna give you that target, I'm going to let you go because there's probably 10 different ways in order for you to get at that and the team will figure out the best way to do that. Just give you space and put whatever buzzword on you want, that's not important to me if it's empowerment, if it's team building, it's about getting after it and giving you the

space to do it and celebrate, you know. I think we should celebrate as much as we can and even if we fail and we don't get a target I think you still learn from that and that's just as important. Sometimes you learn more from defeat than you do from winning. - [Howard] But definitely 'cause if you didn't fail, then what did you really learn? I mean, did you challenge yourself enough, right. I think that, again, from a leadership perspective I found more joy in watching those small teams of those individuals take on a challenge that they never felt like they could take on, trip up a little bit and then watch them grow, right? And then actually succeed after that problem set, right? I mean, I think that looking back at the wing priorities over the last year, how many, you know, walls did we hit? How many barriers did we hit and how many different ways did we try to come after these problem sets to where we're starting to see some people building the ladders over the barriers finding ways around the barrier, under the barrier, in all different directions, even lobbying far away. (Laughs) - [Rick] And so they're all good, right? Those are all good opportunities. - [Howard] Yes but you know, when you're standing in front of that wall, you don't necessarily see that. That's why you have to pass it back, you have to pass it right, pass it left and let those other team members run with the ball and see where we go. - [Rick] Yeah. And there's no shortage of challenges. No shortage of problems in the future. And for us to say, we're going to solve everything, we got a plan for everything, I think that would be unfair and naive. - [Howard] (laughs) It will be a complete lie. - [Rick] A complete lie but we just gotta face all these things head on. And I think that's what I think about, you know, what's what, what's the next thing up. And if we were to fast forward and get our time machine jump to a year from now there probably gonna be things that we'd faced that I couldn't write on paper right now. - [Howard] I know - [Rick] just like a year ago. - [Rick] About to say if we reversed a year ago, we definitely wouldn't be saying, hey. I think we would have said this, this, this and that would have already been done. That, you know, we definitely we would have had there's leadership off-sites and Robbins. We would have had a bunch of other leadership opportunities. We would have seen a couple of other units grow in different directions. We would have seen mission sets change in some other ways, but because of all of these different changes and everything we're definitely in a different seat. - [Rick] Yeah. And I think that the common theme for me is you know, the airmen. We persevere right with the airmen. Some people call it on the backs of the airmen. Kind is, like, it takes all of us here to pick up and do our piece and be part of the team. And sometimes I'm carrying more load than other times and we're going to ask everybody to pick up their load and the teams and pick everybody else up around them and keep plugging away. - [Howard] I definitely like to think of it more of as a scrum, right, from rugby. We're all tied in together and it's only based on the force of all of us together that moves us forward than anyone. So no one's getting treaded over. It's just all of us driving in the same direction. Sometimes when we have to, you know, hit a flank. We're definitely as a scrum together tight knit and moving forward. - [Rick] Awesome, yeah. Hey, thanks chief. Appreciate your time. - [Howard] Thank you, sir. - [Rick] And until the next challenge. - [Howard] Yes sir. (Paper crumbling sound) (Gentle music)