

## Ep. 55: Introducing the 53rd Network Operations Squadron

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Welcome, gladiators, to another episode of the Sword and Shield. I am Chief Master Sergeant Christopher Howard, 960th Cyberspace Operations Group superintendent. And today with me I have... Hey this is Lieutenant Colonel Justin Kunath, the commander of the 53rd Network Operations Squadron. And also Senior Master Sergeant Thomas Cougill, the operational superintendent for the 53rd NOS. Awesome welcome gentlemen I appreciate you taking the time to chat with me and kind of inform our gladiators out there a little bit about uh you and uh your unit so what uh what does your unit do well I would say that we're very similar to the 560 first Network Operations Squadron 83rd Network Operations Squadron and that we more or less maintain a lot of the infrastructure that the air force network rides on so for instance we have about somewhere around 900 network devices and services that we maintain and uh more or less stuff like active directory email things of that nature so all the core services that you would have or use on the air force network that's really what we do okay I would say that our user base is about 945 000 different separate users and that encompasses about 125 bases and somewhere in the realm of 386 geographically separated so we have a pretty broad diverse user base and responsibility yeah that seems like a huge uh you know huge footprint out there um in a large load for a unit how do you take care of that what AFSCs does your unit have to manage all of those tasks so with those different tasks we have one barbell force we have different realms of the 3dos and the 3d ones that has our operator staffs our 17 sierras and 17 deltas lead the way as both the do ado commander and other flight officers as well and then we obviously cannot do any of that without our admin support with our three fonts trust awesome yeah it's a unique uh unique blend uh compared to most units right what is uh what does a day in the life look like in your unit so if I was a brand new airman to your unit what would I see come UTA I would say it's probably a lot of churn because you just never know what you're going to experience whenever you walk in most of it is in the typical UTA is administrative you're taking care for routine administrative tasks making sure that your ancillary training is up to date and just ensuring that you're ready to go unable to perform the mission now we do have most of our positions are a certified mission ready positions so we have a pretty lengthy uh and involved uh certification process folks go through or becoming certified on the weapon system itself we have a couple different positions a couple different bikes folks can go into and they vary from working on the uh just basically taking care of the infrastructure devices to doing scanning to ensuring that the weapon system itself is protected and

then reaching out to more or less look at all those other devices container the health of the network and ensuring they're protected as well we also take care of the orders that come out from the 616th operation center and take care of those orders as well more or less doing whatever they direct us to do in relation to defense and operation of the network okay gotcha.

So with that said if uh I'm like non-prior or if I'm a cross-trainee what's that timeline look like for me to be qualified going from you know unqualified to fully qualified and operating on your weapon system so chief uh that's uh that's an excellent question uh especially as a non as a non-prior obviously going through basic training and then frame all depending upon which AFSC the tech school uh dates frame uh the dates are a bit different but after completing the tech school there are two different courses uh depending upon what operating position uh an individual actually sits in the first course that an individual has to take is a two-week course and that just gives an overview of the weapon system itself and then after completing that a they roll over into their specific operator position which is known as a an IQT which is the initial qualification training after completing IQT and actually setting foot within the unit then we start working with our chief of training and we get them set up with MQT which is mission qualified training and again depending upon the operating position that an individual will do that could be a two-week course as well but you get that hands-on experience uh with the weapon system uh we do have the opportunities at time to bring individuals out on a what's known as a prog tour to actually get them completely certified uh and that brings them up to the level so that they actually can sit for a an evaluation at the very end to completely be mission ready and that usually takes 160 169 days on an active status having individuals actually learn more and work on the weapon system gotcha okay awesome so that initial commitment is pretty significant but uh there's definitely some payoff right you guys have any specified certificates that you guys get like sec plus or ci CSSP anything like that by chance I think as a result of the school that folks go to again depending on the school that they attend you know I know for our 3ds and especially our one bravo's they will get a secret buster to get out of the out of their text so that is a industry certification it's uh I think is charging around 250 for that last time that I checked and it's internationally recognized as a security certification so it's easily transferable to the civilian community and if anybody wanted to get a job this is an excellent opportunity for say like a first-term airman to come in get trained get some experience on working with actual network equipment in a very dynamic environment and then taking that experience and going out into the sewing community and getting a job with that experience gotcha yeah definitely something very useful uh in today's society uh and in the technical realm right um yeah it's also very highly prized the last time that I checked there was a projected shortage of over a million i.t professionals across the uh well across the globe and that was uh in 2021 so I'm pretty sure that these have not changed as a matter of fact I'm very sure that they've increased and just because of the of the need and it professionals are and continue uh in high demand no fully agree right I think that's one of the beauties of this industry and our mission set specifically is

that there's a lot of correlations uh that can be made with uh industry yet uh when it comes to the military side of the house the mission set that we have uh the uniqueness of that and the effort that you make to get after our enemies help balance and give you something you won't see in industry so we've talked a little bit about training and development from a skill set perspective what else do you specifically do as a unit to develop your members well I think the uh one of the things that everybody would say whenever I first came into the unit was my mantra was getting us back into operations and part and parcel to that was developing our people primarily because we have uh five full-time AGRs that we have authorization for five full-time folks and that is a lot of work for a pretty minimal amount of AGRs so we had to make use of just about everybody's skills and capabilities and really lean back on our TR workforce on getting some of those things accomplished that we just needed to accomplish as an organization to survive really so part of what I implemented was I asked leaders to be leaders and supervisors doing and then for individuals to assume a greater deal of responsibility for their own uh upkeep and welfare so that means that you know folks who are coming due for their IMR they're not waiting for somebody to tell them that it's coming dude they're actually going out looking at their racing status or their medical status and getting things done likewise it's supervisors who are tracking that for their respective individuals and flight commanders like chiefs who are also tracking.

It just allows us to get a better handle on the requirements and getting just making sure that they're accomplished so I've asked the TRs especially at the leadership level become more involved and by leaps they have surpassed my expectations I've been in a couple of units of course you know I've been with the 960th.

And I've never seen this level of TR involvement in any other organizations that I've been part of I've had people that um since I've given them entrepreneur and more or less the charge to take care of their people and take ownership of their flights they have taken that and ran with it in ways that I just did not expect I have a significant amount of uh involvement from them uh they're taking care of things without me asking them to I more or less told them what to do and got out the way and they are taking care of business copy so you would say that you guys have a really good culture there right almost like a fam family atmosphere as well as a good professional bound uh culture then so chief I would I would greatly say that I know uh coming in in the middle or uh kind of near the end of the pandemic that we've been going through I saw a lot of uh involvement within all of the individuals even working remote and then now since we are starting to come uh back into person back into our normal what I like to call the new normal because you know everything can change we are starting to bring back even functions and processes that were there in the in the previous i.e. for example we have family event coming up that we've already started to plan for because we want to have that uh that morale that family uh unison and to bring our family members um into the unit as well to get them involved we've had a lot of changing faces uh within the past year

and a half or so and so we want to include all of those new family members within the organization as well right yeah there's definitely a lot of opportunity there as we come out of this Covid scenario so that's awesome that you guys are putting together the those group gatherings and kind of breaking that bread and reestablishing that connection that many of us uh lost it and feel from the past year and a half and covet what other kind of events uh you guys kind of uh get after you guys do any exercises uh or group a t by chance yeah so we do a lot of um like I said before a lot of my focus and the direction from colonel Janicki and colonel Erredge just going to get us back to operations so with the onset of covet we lost a lot of our of our CMR positions or proficiency really or certifications because people weren't able to access the weapons system so we've been getting them back into operations I've been getting them scheduled for classes just for required courses to get their certifications back online so we can actually start doing operations again so that that's been consuming a majority of our time during the UTAs and then for at time we actually have folks that come out as needed really to support operations with 560 first and I will say the 560 first has been an excellent partner with us they are very accommodating and very appreciative to have us there.

They specifically ask us for input on initiatives they have going on especially with respect to I need some help from this particular day or I know that senior master and Cougill is working with the operations side to make arrangements for folks to come in and work operations on their at time when there's a need on the 560 side.

It is not really conducive to well the requirement isn't really there at this point for us to do group at the time and it's more conducive for us to plug in where we're actually needed at a prescribed time uh with the 560 person that's proven to have a couple of dividends and like I said earlier they just appreciate having us around and our support so that TFI that whole TFI relationship is strong then and you guys have a lot of easy plug-and-play uh for orders and at and uh for uh keeping up on being certified on the weapon system right absolutely geez and also to add to uh what uh mentioned so being uh being the belly button for all the different exercises that we get involved in uh since I landed since I had boots on ground in November of 20 I've been engaged with the other counterparts that actually manage and create different exercises for cyber now unfortunately volunteers that we have had four different exercises the exercise themselves ended up getting cancelled simply for uh the fact of Covid right however we do have a highly engaged staff that want to participate in different um weapon system exercises i.e. there's a there's exercise that happens every single year cyber flag we've had individuals interested in that their range itself has been has been having issues so to ensure that the training for that particular type of event uh could still occur one of our staff sergeants actually has created an in-home cyber range and we're actually looking to push that out to be a formal type of training for our operators as well okay awesome one of the other unique aspects of your unit is that you guys are sitting right there on the uh on the gates of uh space force correct that's right uh do you see any interaction currently

with uh their changeover or any opportunities uh in in support of them by chance well I see some potential for future involvement of course the space force gets repeat underneath them and starts really figuring out what they're doing as a separate force I I'm anticipating the person requirements to come down as there usually is you know any time that you have an admission area people aren't really quite as the best way to put it they just don't know exactly what it is they don't know so as they get their feet underneath them start figuring out hey I need to do this to support this mission that's when the school requests are coming yeah so there's always a potential and you follow that uh as well so since we're an enterprise level you know we uh if you look at the navy network and the marines fall underneath them so they have their special needs and their mission sets so they have their com cyber personnel that they'll have directly supporting that but as a whole since we manage the entire uh affine then we will always continue to support we have seen a lot of turnover from our active duty counterpart the 561st just simply because they have they have had a lot of their personnel picked up by space force gotcha no I understand that I just wanted to know how some that their relationship looked like right um where is some of that cross utilization might occur um what opportunities are going there right um you know kind of do you see any what do you see as the future for your unit well that's an excellent question that we were discussing I think that we're going to have a potential uh refocus on some specific areas that we're currently performing some areas may actually go to other units and will retain uh and expand upon specific areas um so that that's still in you know I will say it's in draft it's um it's not even reached I'll see just yet but I think we're headed that direction fairly quickly bottom line is I think there's going to be a lot that we're going to be asked to do and you know as soon as the ass comes from the active duty we'll just have to prepare to step up and meet the demand right yes cyber's ever its pace is just crazy right um it's ever changing and uh we have to be very flexible and I know when it comes to the reserves uh and sometimes that that kind of leads to its own problem set of keeping up with that speed what uh what kind of advice do you guys give as leadership teams to your airmen in uh in these situations where we're asking our airmen to be agile to be flexible uh and roll with the punches you know um with the mission set and some of the of that is just changes them involved in the discussion and communicating what changes are coming down so we're not necessarily giving them advice other than hey uh you this is this is how cyber is it's the career field it is an excellent career field to be in it's always in demand you're never going to be without a job unless you know there's some significant event that I'm just not tracking them right now and then it just it's just the way that cyber is so we just have to roll with punches be flexible and adapt to whatever really comes down to pipe right chief and as I mentioned earlier so I like to use the term new dowel rather than the new norm because what could be uh is that now it could change drastically tomorrow and as you mentioned we see that in cyber on a regular basis no definitely that's definitely a good catch right there the new now versus the new norm because I think the norm now is change right definitely okay awesome well it seems like we've really kind of captured what your what your unit has any parting words for your fellow gladiators any uh last pitches of why you guys are the best unit out there well I'll say that our unit is the best

because of the people we have bottom line you know I've been to lots of different bases lots of different organizations and generally speaking everybody in the air force is roughly the same just really good people that are really interested in making sure that the mission goes across I have not had anybody that has more or less given me a vibe to say hey I just don't want to be here.

And the same place at the right time to just take where we need to go next I will uh I will all day long awesome no gentlemen I really do appreciate your time um please uh send my regards to your team uh tell them thank you on my behalf for all of the dedication that they uh they show um the pride in the mission uh the pride in wearing this uniform and the excellent work that they do as cyber warriors with that said gladiators I hope you guys are having a great day uh thank you for your service thank you for your commitment your dedication uh being excellent cyber warriors and remember let's stab our enemies in the face through cyberspace.