

## Ep. 59: Introducing the 854th Combat Operations Squadron

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)

Welcome to another episode of the Sword and Shield. I'm Chief Master Sergeant Christopher Howard, 960th COG Superintendent. And today with me, I have... Colonel Don Kelly, I'm the commander of the 854th Combat Operations Squadron. Chief David Solis, 854th Superintendent. Senior Master Sergeant Ronald Enriquez, combat plans division superintendent. Awesome, gentlemen, I appreciate you taking some time today. Uh and I just kind of want to just go ahead and jump into it and talk a little bit about your unit. So uh 854 COS. What does your unit do sir? Right. So the combat operations squadron is really involved in a lot of different mission sets we support to primary customers. And I would say it's a premier unit in the Air Force Reserve, getting after the National Defense strategy on a daily basis. Whether it's adversarial engagement or supporting are numbered Air Force. We are in a lot of different missions that make a difference every day in the defense of our nation. That's really fantastic. We do some of the name things we do are Offensive cyber operations, defensive cyber operations, D. O. D. Information network operations. We do support some of the Intel that the Air Force does and we do some other activities that I can't go into here. But it's awesome. It's a really fun unit, vibrant dynamic unit to be in. Right. And because of that level, you guys are considered what a T. Or two type of unit, correct? So you're looking for trained qualified individuals to come in. So people with experience out there in the operational environment. Right? So we're at the operational level of war, so not at the tactical um we do some of that, but it's primarily at on the command control, fly in the Air Force network on a daily basis, which is it's kind of amazing when you think about it that way you can support the 6 16. So see right? Yes. Okay. Which means you guys have your fingers in all of the pie and you know, and really making the day-to-day actions happen. Right? We do. And so with the 6/16 up center. So for some folks who may not be familiar with it, it's a recent blending of the six 24th op center and six 25th stop center. So we have this cyber oc and the Intel Oc. For the Air Force blended into the 6/16 op center. And we as a reserve associate unit support that that blending. And it's really a fascinating thing to look at the precise point. We are in the history of the Air Force and in the nation going well, we've got cyber and Intel together and as we go forward, a couple of different mission sets, it's really an interesting juxtaposition of the two different through fields and watching how they, how they blend together. Okay, awesome. So you talked about career fields, What if it sees, do you guys leverage to support your mission? So we have a lot of FCS here in the 854 were a mixture of three deltas, one

ends, one bravo's. We have some 17 S. Is 14 November's, few 16 golfs. And of course our CSS personnel, the three F five s, which really they kind of keep the glue together and make sure that all of our TR members are taken care of. Okay. And you guys have, that's mattered out across your organization, right? So how does your organization's kind of built? You guys have work centers, you have divisions, what does that kind of look like? So chief were broken up into approximately 10 different divisions and within each one of those divisions, a lot of those FCS are sprinkled in. Oh, I forgot to mention that with information warfare, also known as I w coming on board and there is a potential that we're going to bring in a lot more those skill sets as well. So we'll be in some new uh, FCS yet to be announced, but those, those will be flushed down will be seeking some qualified candidates to help us with our mission. Um so again, we're broken up to 10 different divisions and a lot of those FCS are in each one of those divisions and the main, you know, our main focus as a reserve associate unit to the 616 is to provide mission capable TRS um in the event of a crisis where they would call on us to surge into the D. O. C. Okay. And that's a lot of movement. Right? When we talk about 10 divisions, a number of people. Um so what does like the day in the life look like with such a large organization like that? So the demand signal is pretty strong right now from the from the 616, they love they love us reserve as being a part of that organization and they're always calling on us to fill mph positions. And so the day in the life really kind of just really revolved around that, making sure that our members come in for their U. T. A. S. Uh take care of some of the dedicated administrative things that they need to be done. But what's really unique on our unit is that we carve out special times E. G. T. A. That the that the members can practice their craft and that's their mission qualification training and then we actually will practice um we'll practice going through our planning cycle in the Oc. So that way before called upon, we can do it without hesitation and at the Red Gap has the confidence that the reserve can fulfill that mission. Okay so you talked about practicing that craft. Um is that just through exercise and through training or do we actually have see time doing the mission? So it's really great for our members is we do participate in exercises. Um Global Thunder, Global Lightning, austere challenge, pacific Century. And when you really think about what a TR wants, when they join the reserves, it's that excitement, right. It's what they see on TV. I want to be in the military, I want to go and do things and sometimes you don't get that satisfaction if you're in the Oc. But what's really unique about us is that we can put our fingers and all those different exercises and get people out the door to experience different things globally and seeing that effect to a combatant command commander can provide. That's one of the great things about it too as well. And not just with the exercises but with the day to day even coming out on the to or we have folks that are working Monday through Friday, doing that daily support to the rig off into the mission, practicing their craft on a daily basis. Right? And you know, obviously not getting any of the classified pieces, but um in the past, you guys actually sent people to other AOC. S. Right to support as part of the planning cells. Um, and then you guys participated in other exercises. And I know that there's some uh other examples of where your members at A 54 are impacting um national um events and supporting national events throughout the year. Right well, and also with the mission focus on the Joint Force headquarters, Cyber Air Force, which is a

mouthful. We have folks that are assigned in there. So that's where some of those 10 divisions are and they are on a daily basis. And some of those are folks on a p orders as well, but they are engaged daily with direct support to the warfighter and some of them are the warfighter right now, This one thing I love about cyber is the fact that we're fully engaged with the enemy every day when our airmen come into the UTA. They are in the A. O. R. Um and your unit is one of those key positions, right uh to support the AOR to be engaged in the mission and how direct forces. So it's very exciting for me right now. One of the things that I would say about that is that some of the work and we're working on trying to tell the story as well. Um just like we're doing with the podcast is telling the story of what our airmen do on a regular basis and getting that too, not just the wing commander but to the number of Air force commander and General Scobee is the AFRC commander. So he can go and tell General Kelly as the comment commander A. C. C. The great things that the Reserve Command is doing and a lot of that is done here in our squadron and that's directly going to compact. That is then also going to the combat commanders across the globe of how we as a squadron participate and make a difference on a daily basis. And a lot of times they go home and go I can't I can't believe that we get to do what we do on a daily basis. This is fantastic and they pay us to do it, this is great. Yeah. No there's nothing better than putting warheads on foreheads right? You know are making bad things happen to bad people. And it's one of the things that I really like about some of our mission sets and specifically they 54 is that that impact is happening on a daily basis. And I reserve airmen are citizen airmen are in those seats making that happen. And that's a great thing that you bring up as far as also being a citizen airman is they bring such a rich diversity to the mission set because typically when you're talking about active duty folks, they don't also work for MacAfee or semantic or firearm Indian or any of those other companies that are also have different perspectives. Or we have some folks that are um working for the state Department or U. S. A. I. D. Or summer stay home parents. But they have different perspectives and they bring just a much richer diversity. So when you say, hey, what does this mission set look like? Well, I actually worked that in my civilian job. Oh you do well, you know, teach us, we'll just sit at your feet and learn. And so really, that's one of the great things about the reserve. And you guys also leverage that to write as being part of the hub for some of our large force engagements, a large force of exercises and you take some of that, not the knowledge and you get it out to the other units, correct, correct. Um, and that's a good point to bring up. When we're talking about talent, talent management and our reserve Forces, we really seek the opportunity to bring other weapons, cyber weapon experience to the O. C. So as a Tier two, uh Tier two level organizations, we really couldn't do it without having operators that have other types of experience within the wing. So we're actively always seeking to bring people back into our organization, right? We also crossed another operationally theses on occasion, right to make sure that we're getting a different purview, more diverse background of operations so that we're supporting it holistically and completely right awesome. Um so with the other piece that reservists really love about serving down the weekend is not just the mission set, but it's the airman development. So what do you specifically do to develop your airman? So uh a lot, I'm happy to say that in a 54 we're not just giving professional

development, lip service were actively doing it. Perfect example of that is we have a speed, mentoring session is going to go on this uh UTA. Um so just like if you go into Baskin Robbins, right? And they have 31 flavors, um not everyone can find uh not everyone likes vanilla, right? Right. Maybe in a mentorship speed session, they find the flavor that they like right and they connect and it's about making connections. Right. Right. And so we're making that investment up front for our airmen so that we can prepare the leaders of tomorrow now immediately, but it's not just at that, right? So it's at the tactical level that we're getting after that way at the operational strategic level that we have other initiatives in the 854 right now as we speak, one of those that we are aggressively pursuing with the 6/16 and within our group is to create what we call a cyber Training Center of Excellence sounds really, really exciting and weird and crazy all at the same time. Well essentially what it is really a collaborative effort of all our SMEs in one place so we can start doing some one stop shopping and take a lot of the waist and grind that all of us locally within the J. B. S. A. Community are actively doing on our drill weekends and consolidating that training into one place so that we can give back that time to our sister units are group or the 6/16 for that matter. How is that value added? Well, its value out in the sense that if we look at the traditional art model right, why does the reserves exist here today? Well, once upon a time we were supporting airframes and teaching the active duty how to maintain airframes. That was 20 years ago. That was where it came from. And we're trying to get back to that business model where we as the reservists, the older hats, the ones who have the continuity are there doing that training and helping the organized and equipped peace with our active duty counterparts and within our own group and wing. So break from the strategic level. How does all this tie together? Well, Ideally us as a Tier two organization. We want to get those graduated tactical level sneeze from all this, the respective weapons systems within our group or from active duty and have them come up to us as tech sergeants, right? And then we want to groom them into senior N. C. O. S. And then we want to return them back down to those tactical level organizations because, wow, can you imagine what that's going to look like and how much more efficient we're going to be an executing mission getting after our adversaries and etcetera. So it's a very exciting mission. Like my exposure previous to this assignment has been all tactical and a whole different realm, communications and whatnot. This is very much tip of the spear, but a different type of sphere. Um and it's super exciting to be a part of. Um and there's a very bright future, especially with the I. W. Conversations coming online. We're trying to look at things differently from a different paradigm, were not tied to a FCS, were tied to experience. And we're looking for people who are out of the box thinkers, right? Who are liking to challenge to the status quo, because status quo is not going to get us a victory with the with the adversaries that we face today, We need the out of the box thinkers and we're looking for them. If you're out there listening, contact us, please. Right. So, I mean, I think that's a great idea, right? And it's a conversation that we have senior leaders is um you know, how do we look at that 3-5 year game? Right. When we're talking about cyber being still fairly young, our wing commander talks about how we're still in our kind of you know younger years and development and maturity. Um this is one of those key pieces that's going to help us look at what that talent pool is going to look like.

Talent management the next 3 to 5 years and putting together a development plan so that we can have individual units at the weapons systems rotate up to the O. C. Provide that that tactical knowledge PBOC on point of how tactical T. T. P. S. Are being leveraged and then also grow, develop within the IOC and then go back out to those units and then provide both sides of that house. Right. Right. Well we also working on painting picture. Thank you for the training piece of it. And it goes along with the training. Is what does it take to get an airman whether they're off the street or coming from active duty or from another career field? What does it take them to get to be a combat mission ready and all those steps, whether it's uh six months or whether it's three years looking at every piece and going, okay, this is what the step is, this is the next step. And being very intentional, so as not to waste their time, because what I don't want to do is have an airman get joined to the unit and sit for six months while we try to figure out life for the chairman. I wanna I wanna very deliberately say, okay, the plan for you for the next 6 to 12, 6 years, six months to two years is you're gonna go to this training, you're gonna do this training and we're gonna get you qualified here. We're going to get you to sit on the position to do to get your crew certification. And we're gonna get you smart qualifications and then you're gonna get, you're gonna be proficient at it and all those things that we're gonna be doing um is we're gonna be spending dollars to buy mission readiness and it's going to be deliberate uh all along the way. So it's not just, hey, who wants to go do something? That sounds fun. It's going to be, this is where we're going. This is what we need you to do. This is what we expect of you. This is what you can expect from us and this is where you can expect to be in the next couple of years. Does that look good for you? Is that where you want to go? Because we don't want to waste people time either. They don't want to go there in the next couple of years, and then maybe we're not a good fit for them. But if they do, we're certainly on board and willing to get them there. And it's not just about so they can be a good Airman, good troop or combat ready troops for our squadron is so they can be it for the Air Force. So whether we farm them back out to the group or the wing or to another unit in the Air Force, um, it's there are, you know, a trained, ready to combat, ready to bring combat power for a beer for the nation? A great point, Right? You know, and a couple of things that you really hit on there too is that time management beings right. Um one of the death knells for all of our reservist is the fact that we have a short period of time. Um we have dedicated time, we have a lot of requirements, so how do we balance that out? And I think that any unit that's kind of looking at that scheduling and being deliberate um set themselves apart, right? Because we hear horror stories on the basis of how mutts are just pandemonium, so I love to hear the fact that we're getting after this problem set and really trying to focus um you know, it's an A F R. C um issue, it's an arc issue of how do we maximize that time on the minimum dollar and we maximize the training with minimal amount of time. How are we going to be innovative? And it sounds like, you know, with the Center of Excellence, with some of the scheduling processes that we're really getting out for that problem set, so you need to er that's interested in being focused and dedicated, it definitely seems like a good place to go. Um and it kind of lines up with the next thing I was thinking about asking is what's the future for your unit? Well, so it's a great question in the future is just getting better and better every day. So the

radiograph and General Hawk as the 16th Air Force commander in conjunction with commuters are trying to really get after what is I. W or information warfare information operations. How do you get into um the adversarial space of really affecting outcomes, whether it's a cyber platform or another kinetic platform or it's a non traditional weapons employment, what does that actually look like? And so that's kind of wrapped up into I w so I know when we had the wing leadership summit recently they came and talked about, well I w is different career fields like, oh yes, I public affairs, whether just different curriculums, you wouldn't normally think of doing adversarial engagement and putting all those together and saying, okay, here's the mission space, this is what the ask is. How do we best get after it and the least amount of time? Because it's not a fight tonight, It's a fight now scenario. I mean it's not we our troops in contact. Um and so it's how do we best blend those? And so we've got a big rig off asking us um as even as a as a wing and as a squadron, what does I w look like we want you to be the I. W. Future for the Air Force. And so a lot of folks are looking at our squadron and going, hey, let's define this together. And so it's a learning adventure. Um, it's a lot of questions we don't know the answers to Ray Gap is still trying to figure it out, but we're working with them and trying to be good partners and, and really getting after, not just information worker, but You know, working with the math or the 16th Air Force. And do you have any uh Anyway, I had to it. Right. So you know, currently we're looking at all of our responsibilities in the 854 and there will be a massive readjustment. Um, some, some areas are gonna grow, some are going to get a little bit smaller because this is not just a fixed organization. Cyber is very dynamic and we need to change with that. So it could be something that changes every two years or every three years nobody really knows, but we're adaptable and will continue to meet that challenge. Right? So to answer your question, chief is like, as far as the future of the 854, uh, it definitely has one and it's strong. So if you crave adventure and you adapt to change and you like change, wow, we've got a place for you. Um, I'd really see our mission evolving greatly, uh, into areas that we've never gone before, which that's a super exciting for star trek folks out there. And then on top of that, we are the search capacity for our active duty counterparts. Right? So we have an embedded no kidding real mission uh, underneath the surface, but I think are the biggest staple in our diet as reservists moving forward, is going to be providing that continuity and the subject matter expertise that the active duty is desperately looking for, that's where we're going to make a large investment in the future. That's where a lot of our recruiting efforts and hiring decisions are going to be focused moving forward. And again, it's not about AFSC. We're looking for specific skill sets moving forward and moving out because we're recruiting for the future, not today. Right. Yeah. And you know, to kind of pull a couple of points each of you made, right? Um, it is a dynamic environment, right? When we talk about cyber domain, um, it's ever evolving by the second, um, it's moving at the speed of technology and technology is replicating and growing by the second by the minute. And when we talk about domains, cyber is one of the only uh continuously contested environments, right? We are making troops with contact every moment. Right? When we're doing cyber defense, when we're doing operational cyber, each one of those things are coming into contact with enemy troops on a regular basis. It's not

the traditional way of looking at it, but we have to be dynamic, we have to be innovative, we have to be flexible to meet the demands of our leadership and to meet the demands of the national security. So I definitely think that you guys are on the precipice of potentially making a lot of changes to meet that demand. Right? So it's exciting. That's for sure. Um and we're also fighting through the bureaucracy of it. Of how do we actually make this thing productive at the end of the day? And there's a lot of paperwork that goes on the back end. And my perspective is what's in the best interests of the airman, why is it taking so long, what can we do to, you know, cut out paperwork or signatures or anything along the way to get after getting airmen to be mission ready. That is the b actually is. Let's go. Let's understand why are there holdups? Because there, you know, there are um and there can be, you know, whether it's issues with pay, where there's issues, you know, and if we're talking to reserve us, you know, what some of those issues are and we are about getting after those and resolving them, because at the end of the day, there's an airman on the other end of that order or the pay problem and there's probably a family, there's people that are, you know, you got your civilian employers, there's a whole lot of people that come along that aren't just our airmen that are affected. And so we're trying to keep them all in mind as well because our airmen are, you know, a national treasure and we're also, they're also serving the nation in other ways and we want to respect their time as well right there for it in the past. And I, I reiterated often that the Air Force's biggest weapons systems, the personnel, right? And then we have to take care and maintain that weapon system as much as we have to do each of the side, the weapon system. So that's, that's really good, definitely. You know, that that kind of encompasses the accelerate change lose. Right? When we look at the A. B. CS that we have to get after it all puts it together. So that's, that's phenomenal that we're getting after both of those problems sets. What else would you like that? You know? And yeah, great as you were talking about the families and things like that, really trying to leverage our key spouse program as well. Um, I know the, uh, we've had some key style support in the past. We've got a good strong response program now and just trying to make it better because again, there are airmen and families involved and it's not just, hey, I'm going off to the job as you know, the sacrifices of the families as well. And so we definitely appreciate those and we want to make those sacrifices. Well, they still happen. We want to minimize the impact too. Their kids or family members or friends or the support mechanism that goes along with that. So I really appreciate our key spouse program as well. Awesome. I have a question for you chief, who is the largest squadron in that? 960th in the 960th Cyberspace Operations Group. I think it's a tie, but no, I think it's 854th. What about the wing, the wing, you know, looking at the numbers jump in my head, you definitely won the largest. I meant to say we are the largest and not necessarily anyways. Um, but no, you know, key point, right. A lot of opportunity, a lot of airmen, um, you know, growth potential there when we talk about leadership both on the officer side and then listed side. Um, you know, being a tier two and one of the only tier two as we do. That was exactly the point I was trying to make. So for career progression wise we have room for growth for, for people who want to look at progressing in their career, whether the officer enlisted, we do have a large pool of officers, right? And enlisted and enlisted and, and a lot of

senior N. C. A. Type billets, both full time and TR, so I had to give the shameless plug for the recruiting efforts I would expect. Nonetheless. Absolutely. Well, gentlemen, I do appreciate your time. I do appreciate the efforts that you're making on behalf of the pyramid and I appreciate you sharing your story, right. But most of all, I appreciate your, each of your sacrifices. Put a uniform on for our nation, for my family, um, and thank you for all the hard work that you put together for your airman. Um, and with that, to all of my gladiators out there, let's get out there. Let's get after the enemy. Remember stab them in the face through cyberspace.