

Ep. 63: The wing first sergeant

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)

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 Master Sergeant Natasha Estes. Welcome. Sure. Great that we're getting this opportunity to talk right. Um you know, we, we like to highlight a lot of members And today we'd like to talk about you your position at the 960th Cyberspace Wing, a little bit about you, a little bit about your career, and you know, probably dig into some experiences as a first sergeant. So can you tell us a little bit about yourself and your career? Thank you, chief. I really appreciate this opportunity to speak with you all today. Um, I actually hit 19 years last month being in the Air Force. Thank you. Um, I came in active duty and um I took the test and the recruiters like hey you could have any avid job you want and I said no I want to be on the front lines and so I didn't really know I was talking about, I was 17. He's like hey I got the best job for you, how about security forces. So I said okay what do they do? And I said I want to be a investigator. He's like, well you start there. So I'm like, cool. So long story short, I did six years active duty as security forces. Within that time frame I deployed to Iraq. Um, I also was a part of the elite gate guard, which most people don't know what that is anymore. Old school, all right, old school with ascots and court brown boots. And then I also uh, was in the honor guard for eight months. So, um, I have a rounded experience. So after my security forces tour, I tried to cross train and at that time manning was low. So they said, no, we don't want any first time airmen cross training out of security forces. So I did a palace front into the reserve and I left Las Vegas Nevada and went to Wright Patterson Air Force Base where I served for 11 years as a reservist. During that time I cross training to admin. Um, I worked for two command chiefs as their exact and then I took the position as a first sergeant. And so I've had my diamond on for about three years now, maybe three years in November. And um, I've been in three different squadrons, was in OSS. Uh, an ops group also combat Comm. And now I'm here as a wing shirt, awesome. That's a, that's a great uh, you know, track record of excellence there when we talk about league a guard and we talk about honor guard and the first sergeant and I'm sure a number of accolades as an admin in his security forces. Um, so what made you want to be a first sergeant though? So honestly coming into the military and seeing what first sergeants do, especially in security forces, you know, how important their role is. I've always wanted to be a first sergeant. So when you look at, you know, when you ask people, hey, what is your dream job? I am doing my dream job right now to you. Okay, Gotcha. Is it just the interaction with the airmen or is it something else that makes it your dream job? So it's both, um, you know, everybody has a story,

right? Um, I like to think that when I've had issues that I've come across, that, you know, when I give it when I reach out for help that somebody's been genuine with me and so I really do enjoy um looking at a person's face when they come in my office and they say, hey, you know, it's like the worst thing in the world to them. But to me it's like, oh, this is too easy and so being able to kind of navigate through whatever issue it is and kind of help them come to the conclusion of what needs to happen and giving them a resource really does make me happy to make sure that people are taken care of and that they get the help that they need. That's awesome. Yeah, there's quite often that just a little bit of help goes such a long way. You know, I'm sure you can think back to a couple of parts in your career where that first sergeant made that that difference, right? I know that I lived back and there's a there's a couple of first sergeants that no, we're good examples and bad examples at one shirt who was a little bit more sharp and to the point and uh it was having problems with my weight management. So back in the day it was like if you're so tall, you can only be so uh so big and I guess I was a bit of a chunky monkey. I'm not sure. But it was just that based on my side, I was over my weight and that they came in with a bunch of donuts as a welcome to the to the shop for a first sergeant meeting. And uh they're like, yeah, everybody get a doughnut except for you. Thanks to me like, oh no. Uh so you know, it's one of those things are things not to do. You learned the hard way. Um and then there was other times where, you know, uh we're getting tired of money. Um we didn't have uh everything that we needed to take care of some bills and had a first sergeant, make sure that we were able to get some support because of the situation where my spouse has lost their job for a short period time. I'll just get alone and helped us out, right? Or even just the counseling, right? It had another first sergeant that uh took underneath their arms said, okay, I see something in you, especially when things were going kind of rough and make sure that uh I was going on the right path. You get any kind of stories like that by chance. Well, um I don't really have too many bad stories about shirts um you know, one shirt that definitely stands out, you know, I won't say his name or anything like that, but he was the shirt at security forces. And um I used to always see his door, It was like a revolving door, like as soon as somebody is coming out, another person's going in and um I did see him out and about quite a bit, but he was very funny. Um He actually told me that I made staff sergeant before he was supposed to um I can say that now he's retired and gone, but um he just he was always there, his door was always open. So I just remember thinking, you know, while um he's really making an effort in taking the time to understand the issues that people are going through and I wanted to make sure, you know, he just really said that far from me to, you know, it's those mentors, right? That make the difference in your life or in your career, those little things that uh you know, just a good job or hey, how are you doing? Um, and I think that's one of those important pieces of being a first sergeant, but there's also just the holding the standards. What are your views on, you know, the first sergeants role within an organization? So within the organization definitely being available and being present and being aware of what's going on and knowing your people right, being able to um decide or you know, see if somebody's having issue because they're not acting their normal self or you don't see them at their desk or whatever the case is not that I'm trying to, you know, watch time or anything like

that. It's just when you become a family, you get to know people when you're walking around. Um you know, I think that goes a long way. People know, hey, the shirts here we see you're walking around, you know, she's here for her door is open, um, just being available I think says a lot and then leading by example, you know, leadership, being able to speak out and say things and defend people even when, you know, it may not be the most popular thing to do or you're talking with, you know, higher leadership about, you know, certain things that they may not be aware of being able to speak up. I'm naturally a shy person. So for me I have to push myself to come out of my comfort zone to be able to do that. And being a security force has definitely helped me out with that. Um, but definitely leading by example, right? No, exactly. You can lose a lot of credibility really quick for just, you know, minor mistakes were not following the rules or you know, dismissing a standard, whatever standard that maybe. Um, and uh, just you got to go with it. Right. Right. Have to be nimble bubbly, as they would say just to keep on top of everything. So, um, I guess so what, when you're looking at an organization and where it fits what, what are you looking for in your leadership team I guess, you know, because we talked about the trial, we've got that commander, we've got the superintendent and we have you as the first sergeant. So how do you kind of get yourself engaged with your new team when you move on? Since this is your third death, third stint as a shirt now. So I'm glad you asked that question for me. I think transparency definitely stands out for me when I have a leader that can um share a story with me, you know, be an open book and you know, basically let me know that they're human too, you know, and share with me something that's happened to them and not be afraid of what I might think or judge me. That really goes a long way with me. And I have even incorporated that in the way that I laid. So if I have an airman come in my office and they tell me something, I want to make them feel comfortable and say, you know what? Hey, I've probably been through that or I was, I did go through that because it helps people to be able to relate and know that you've experienced it yourself and you're not just reading off a card or you're not reading out of a pamphlet. Like you've actually been through it blood sweat and tears. Um, and so when I have leaders who are able to say, you know what Hey sure you can get through this because I have um an emotional intelligence also an empathy because I would hate to be so upset about something and going to, you know, my chief's office or commander's office and they just, they don't get it, but my leadership gets it. And I can go in there any time and you know, basically tell them what I'm dealing with because I am a single parent. You know, I have different stresses. I have the same stressors that some people have. You know, I've teller worked as a civilian. I was a civilian ones. Um, and so I was part of the, you know, the majority of us who had to kind of deal with those Covid woes and so I can I definitely can relate. And so the transparency goes a long way with me. No, I fully agree. Right? And just kind of want to want to ask that question, right? Is you know, when we talk about leaderships and leadership teams and just general supervision and interaction, um there's not a huge difference, right? When we talk about um what those expectations are um and understanding that you have to be transparent as a leader um and you have to be engaged as a leader and you have to be able to be vulnerable in these situations, especially when you're trying to connect and show that emotional intelligence with

their men because you have a wide variety of experience from red gap um to civilian position being a TR now and a gr right? All of those experiences come into play when we're dealing with an individual element and that knowledge and that's that experience and that that ability to have the empathy and sympathy and bring it to the table really leads to being a good for sergeant. When you say I agree with that chief. Um I was actually when I was asked to be a shirt because it was always a dream of mine but I kind of put it in the back seat because I was dealing with a personal issue at the time and I was nearing my four year with my second command chief and he's looking at me like, hey shirt, what's going on? Like we need to talk about your exit plan in my head. I'm thinking I'm not going anywhere because this is my comfort zone. Like I'm dealing with something right now, He's like, nope, this qualifies you for being a shirt. We need to push you out and so he did. And it would be selfish for me to have come in the military and deal with all the personal things that I dealt with as a child and then coming into the military and dealing with all the personal things that I did moving forward and not share that with the team, right? I don't have to share every detail, but you know, being a single parent going through a divorce, um being a, a fatherless child, you know, when you look at all these different dynamics and the different backgrounds that people come from, they can relate to me and so why would I not want to be a shirt? Why would I not want to stand in the gap and be there to help support people and walk them through whatever issue they have. No, I fully agree. Right? These things, you're brave enough and strong enough to say, hey look, I'm not perfect, I've had my life wasn't, you know, a golden robe and nobody's really is right, but at least you're willing to tap into that leverage that, that experience and then bring that reality to bear for retirement, right? Not a lot of people are willing to be that vulnerable. So I can tell you, thank you personally for sharing that, right? I know that you and I have had a number of conversations and um mentor sessions, mentor sessions about some of these things, uh I can't say that you know, things were easy for me, but it definitely helps when you have that leader that can at least sit down and say, hey um I kind of get what you're coming from, you know, I don't know, you're very exact specifics, I'm not sitting in your shoes this very second, but let me explain to you how my shoes were very similar to yours in this moment? This is how I dealt with it or this is how I went about it. Or even just, hey, I can get an idea of what you're going through and I'm not going to tell you that it's going to be easy, I'm not going to tell you it's gonna be the hardest thing ever. It may be, it may not be, but understand this, um I'm here, I know that you need me and I'm not leaving your side and I've seen that from you and I appreciate that. Thank you chief. No problem. What are one of the things that you like to share with your airmen. As far as uh expectations and career advice if they want to be a first sergeant, good question chief. So um I'm gonna pull my, take my shirt hat off for a second and I'll put my coach hat on and um I like to coach from you know, basics and fundamentals, right, the found, you know, land that foundation. And so if a person wants to be a shirt, I would suggest that they go back to the basics all the way back to BMT, where you learn about Air force culture and Air force history and you start diving into those F. I. S. And then also diving into the first sergeant F. I. And understanding what the role is and why it's so important and you know what you bring to the team and then you decide are you ready for it,

right? Because um I always wanted to be a shirt but I never take a position unless I know that I can commit to it and that I can give my all. And I asked myself the question, you know, with my personal beliefs, with my religious beliefs, will I be able to honestly um be there for Airmen, no matter what they look like, no matter where they come from, no matter what their issue is when they're coming into my office. Because if you've ever been a shirt, you know, you can get something way left field and way right field and you have to sit there with a straight face and not laugh even if you want to and have that bearing, which I got that experience from being an honor guard, you know, some funny things happening, but it's an inappropriate time, right? So I definitely would say, hey reach back to the basics, um you know, shadow somebody, you know, go to an additional duty first sergeant symposium, I was just talking to a young lady today about you know, her the possibility of her being a shirt. And so you have to ask those tough questions because not only do you need to see if it's something they really want to do, but they need to understand what those specifications are. They need to understand what the requirements are. There's a certain number, you know, score that you have to get on your PT test, if you're saying that you want to be a shirt, you have to be able to set the standard and that's on every level across the board and so going back to coaching, um if you want to win a game and coaching, you definitely have to be able to pass the ball with basketball and you have to pass the ball, these are basic things that five year olds can do, and so if you set that foundation, then you can start building on it and adding all these other things to it . But um definitely going back to our culture and you know why we are the Air Force and where we came from and where we're going right now, I think that's a great point, monumental point. Even when we talk about, you know, how to get on the right foot and going back to those basics, even back to be empty, the military bearing customs and courtesies. Um and then of course the point of setting the standard, not just meeting right, it's setting, it's exceeding its being that example um that we're always looking for in for surgeons. So definitely uh some good words of advice there um what would you say is the biggest test of the core values as a first sergeant for you, for me? Um it's being able to uh you know, a lot of people say, oh I hate the word balance. Um but being able to balance all the core values um and know which one to apply at what, you know what given time, right? And so, you know, I have people like you who remind me, hey, you know, you can take off if you need to take care of your kids or whatever, you know, not just giving the advice, but also taking it myself. So if I'm telling, you know, a master sergeant or somebody to take some time off or to take a knee or to do self care, I need to be doing that myself, I have to be able to practice what I preach and that goes into integrity first, right? So service before self, you know, we're in this environment where we're allowed to tell the work and we're supposed to be doing, you know, our job and so, you know, you're lying to yourself if you're at home hanging out and Children having a beer um and not doing, you know, because you can be doing all those things, but are you working? You know, are you getting those emails out? Are you reaching out to your airmen? Um do you know how they're doing? You know, have you real by their house? Whatever the case is, like, don't lie to yourself, um I'm a firm believer that whatever goes under the dark always comes out in the light. So you have to be able to be the example, even though nobody might,

people might not be looking. No, I mean, you know, we talked about, you know, taking the time right? When we talk about service before self, um sometimes we can get miscued on that one very easily, right? Um the expectation there is that you're always going to be thinking towards the mission, but not at a cost to everything else, right? Um We are going to put our mission, we're gonna put our oath in front of all these things that service before south, but that doesn't mean that we drive ourselves into the ground, right? And then secondary piece. You made a great example there, right? When we talk about telework and integrity and service before self, it's um making sure that we are getting after the mission that's getting after airman taking care of them, engaging with them. Um it's getting performance reports out. It's getting mission statements out and it's getting the mission tasks out. It's a it's a wide variety of things. So definitely understanding what that balance is key. You know, I know that we have a lot of talks uh here on the sort of shield about resiliency and in them that work life balance them and it's great to hear that, you know, from a leadership perspective that people are trying to balance that out. Um I guess what kind of words of advice would you give to your airmen in today's Times? Right? We're talking to Covid talking about teleworking, we're talking about, you know, changing standards regularly right now. I mean we're getting into a couple of updates what some words of advice that you have, so where some advice um and you know, like I mentioned before, I am a single parents, I have Children and I like to use them as an analogy a lot of times when I'm speaking to people and because they teach me so much right, um with all the changes that's going on, I always tell my Children, you know, be aware of your surroundings, right? So awareness. Um people, you know, they're getting information from all different levels, social media, Facebook Instagram um room reveal emails and so I kind of have to uh leverage all of those and kind of look and just be aware, even if you're not a social media type of person, you still want to know what your amazon are doing and you can find out quickly what they're doing on some of these sites. And so you want to be aware not only for you to know the standards so that you can be able to articulate what that standard is and you can kinda expel some of that room reveal. And so I would challenge every airman to be aware of what's going on in the world. Be aware of what's going on in the Air Force, be aware of how to wear the uniform. Um so that if something's out of place you'll be able to spot it because there's so many different changes like you said, especially to the uniform um to the hair for women and just in general um with all these changes that are coming and people have been asking for these changes now that you've asked for it, I need you to stay aware of what's going on, right? No great point, right? You know, as it's going to evolve. Uh there's goodness and change and then there's also some conflict with changes now when we change these standards, it's known when they actually get implemented what the intent is and then following it appropriately. I mean we don't want to make ourselves look like a full on public, right? As you know from being an elite guard honor guard, right? We represent um something more than ourselves when we put this uniform on, we represent um a lot of things. We look at the patches on each one of these arms and they symbolize 11 level of leadership or another, but they also represent missions, legacies, cultures, all of that and it just takes uh you know, 11 moment, one mistake and it totally tarnishes each one of those meetings uh and the

sacrifice that a lot of people put in front of that awesome shirt, I really do appreciate you taking the time to talk to us any closing remarks or anything that you want to tell it to our gladiators out there before we go . Yes. Really quick. One thing that we didn't hit on is being proactive and so part of being proactive is okay. We know that we live in a world where changes constantly coming and so what are some of the things that you know, what are some of the issues that you might run into with all these changes because I think you know us who have been in for a while we understand that sometimes um changes come down and everything hasn't really been thought about and so then you start thinking about, Okay, so what if this happens or what if somebody has this question and so being proactive with regard to the changes and also just you know in general . Right? And so um I wanted to add that to our conversation but you know I really appreciate uh and leadership appreciates everything that everybody is doing, whether you're in the office or you know in a room in your house, looking out the window at all the cars going by, you become a nosy neighbor. Um we really appreciate everything that you've done. Also encourage you to read um can't go wrong with reading. You know, I'm not going to tell you what to read, but it would be good to kind of ask your supervisors and people, you know the jobs that you want to have and the things that you want to do, you want to see what they're reading, right, so that you can become better than them and so I definitely encourage reading and chief, I think that's all I got. No, I appreciate it. You know, you shared a lot today and I really do appreciate it taking the time to kind of letting us and understand who you are. Um, some of the things that you've experienced um, and you're just point of view on a couple of these, these points really do appreciate it. So on behalf of uh state gladiators, I want to say thank you for your time, thank you for all that you've done for our organization so far and precursor, all the things you're going to do in your position here at the wind. So congrats on that. Thank you for your time. So gladiators out there please remember. We're thankful for everything you do as the shirt said. Um we're thankful for your sacrifice. We're thankful for uh everything that you put in front of your families at times the time that you spend with us, the sacrifice or make it for your nation. Um, and your time. So thank you and remember stab your enemies in the face through cyberspace. Yeah.