

Ep. 71: Introducing the 23rd Combat Communications Squadron

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Welcome to another episode of the Sword and Shield. I'm Chief Master Sergeant Christopher Howard. 960th COG, Senior enlisted leader. Um and today with me I have the leadership team from the 23rd Combat Comm. Squadron High uh Lieutenant Colonel Pauline Harke from the 23rd Combat Comm commander. I'm Chief Castillo senior enlisted leader of the unit. Awesome. Thank you for joining me today. I'm really excited about talking about the 23rd Combat Comm Squadron. You guys are located out at Travis correct? Yeah. That's awesome. So a lot of listeners out there um those that are part of the cyber wing and those that are not in the cyber wing don't understand what the combat Comm squadron is. Can you kind of Explain to our listeners what do you guys do at the 23rd? So I'll start with that. Uh so basically we have the capability to deploy a team of people um to pretty much anywhere in the world, any location um any no matter how remote and kind of just set up and be kind of a one stop shop for all your communications needs. Um and that voice and data Bones Internet radios. Um everything you need to support is for anything from a small team of people all the way to standing up a whole wing and supporting a wing uh people. So that's kind of what we do anything there chief that's a pretty much sitting on the heads, go anywhere and in the middle of nowhere and set up some communications in order to enable whatever kind of mission we got going on with that location. So when you guys get into a location, it's kind of different. Right? It's not always posh; it's not always four-star hotels. You guys have to be self sufficient in some cases, correct? Some austere locations. It's actually Rarely a four star location. Um and we've set up 10 for folks we've left on costs. Um we've been in some pretty rugged conditions. Um but a lot of our folks really enjoy that. So it takes a unique type of person. But we've been in a variety of different situations. Eric Right? And one of the things I always hear about combat calm is because of that type of environment, because of those kinds of needs. Um that each unit seems to have a very tight knit culture. Would you say that's the same of the 23rd? I'd say so I'd say you have to because you can pretty much do the same thing, right? But the military gets paid according to their pay grade, not what they do so much. So you gotta love what you do because you can do the same thing uh somewhere you know. Yeah I love being out there and getting after it. Otherwise it's really not worth it right now. There's something to be said about getting a little, getting a little sweaty um And working hand in hand with uh your fellow airmen and to make something happen. That's one thing I love about um that expeditionary mission that you all have is that that ability to get out there and work closely and see

the results daily of what you do. Um so if I wanted to be a combat calmer what FCS would I have to have to be in your unit? So we have so we have all the traditional three D. S. You know three D. One X 12 extremes are you know transport R. F. Folks. And then we have our cyber operations full of history. Gos and um the cyber security as well as we have a few supply positions open. We have you know to us and to the one we have our power pro and a track pretty much you know everything that we need to get out on the mission and support ourselves. So for our logistics and for our power requirements we have. I'm lonely theses as well. Gotcha. You kind of have to have a little bit of everything. A flavor there uh to make sure that you can get everything packed up loaded up on trucks or on aircraft and get it to where you need it quick. Right. Right. And that, that's where it came work comes in. I mean we don't train separately according to fSc everyone trains together. And that's really how we foster that teamwork because you know, when we're out there on unemployment or exercises contingencies, you know, really have to work together because uh huh setting up communications is not a one-man job. It's not different parts and pieces that all come together. All those HFCS come together to support our customers. So we really have to work together and we trained together and um, integrate the work centers really well because foster that teamwork and being, I mean you got to really think about it, you know, host base. We take advantage or take it for granted. Uh um, all the stuff that we have, right, we have voice video data all at the desktop instantaneously. Uh, and it seems seamless. And then we go and do this expeditionary piece and you guys have a very small team to do the same thing. Right. That's, that's exactly correct. So it does, it takes a lot of work and oftentimes, you know, our folks are working 24 7, behind the scenes to get those communications support to the customers that they don't really see and they're out there in the field, running cable, um, working in the tent, you know, working together to get that support out there, Right? I know, I mean, being that customer support, you've got everything there that you have to handle. And uh, when we talk about the mission sets that you can support, I mean we're talking about tip of the spear, um, mission sets, uh, airmen that are in uh in contact. So it's very important for you guys to be 100% on your game every day. And uh, I was wondering if you could kind of help us run our listeners through what a day in the life looks like for a 23rd member? Well, you know, it has changed a whole lot disco big thing, you know, we're getting back into the swing of it now um on loan basis right now, we're kind of in a bit of doing a little bit of restructuring because of all the changes that we got coming down the pipeline, uh specifically with HFCS and all that uh, you know, but normally it would come down and we get put into, you know, whatever teams are a part of whatever works. Another part of whether that be, you know, um from the networking side of the operation side or the support side and then, you know, each, each individual section has instructors, they sit down and they go over some of the concepts, we're kind of getting away from that and transitioning to more of a big uh many exercise or equipment training exercise every single day, t a um and that's something like a small team, like kind of four or five people here, you guys are going to do this mission today and um they do the mission while everybody else trains for the next time , you know , you know , they get called up the next day or uh the next G . A. We're trying to get into that battle rhythm of actually going out there and

performing in Michigan because I find uh no one and I talked to the people that they get way more from hands on experience than they do in the classroom. So that's why we kind of headed that way. Uh you want to be out there always doing something because no further we are away from hands on. It's not good for this particular uh you know, you have to be hands on, we have to do it, you learn more from it, you get more experience and that travel, it's the real world, right? No, I think that that go ahead, ma'am, oh, I was just going to say Chief really brought up a big challenge we had with the past year and a half with Covid. I mean the success of our unit really depends on getting people hands on equipment, turning wrenches, you know, during the UK, is to take advantage of that time that we're all together and Covid really hardest there where we couldn't get people in the unit um in person on you to working on the equipment. So now we're dusting off the cobwebs and our next November. This November, you ta we're gonna be doing our first uh equipment training exercise and getting out there and actually working on the equipment in the past, we've really tried to train like we deploy and bring equipment out in the field, you know, act like you were in a deployed location and uh pretty much setting up like you would if you were anywhere in the world, um we've even gone so far in the past is to say, you know, if you forgot something, you can't go back in the building and get it because you wouldn't be able to do that on the deployment . So you need to remember to bring everything that you need um if you were to deploy to a location, so we really train like we deploy and I think it's really important for our folks and they really enjoy it. This isn't your typical, you know, deaths job, we're really out there, they're doing it. No, I completely understand that. I know my years in expeditionary um that practice really makes the difference is, you know, being in garrison or even doing small exercises close to base um to get that repetition of getting those reps up so that when you're actually in the field, um you can get after it, you know, where the parts are, you know, where the pieces are, you know how the equipment is going to be said. Um, and that repetition makes you a lot more comfortable. So when something does kind of slip or something does break or something doesn't go exactly right, that you're prepared to walk through that process because you've done it so many times. Um, and then just from a reserve perspective, you know, when we're dedicating those weekends to this mission set, being able to actually get out there and do it gives you that sense of accomplishment and why you were putting this uniform on every month. Um, so it sounds like that you guys are getting really good feedback from that. Is that, is that true? Yeah. Well, it was one of those things that was identified by, you know, this uh-previous losses. Yeah. I called everybody in the room group-by-group, rank-by-rank and you know, uh separately they told the same story. Uh, you know, we want, we want hands on, we want uh, something always to be structured around what we're actually going to be doing. Um, you know, you want to work together to protect things, you know, and, and it was hate to beat the dead horse. And probably a lot of your, your podcast, you know, Covid, Covid at Ako, you know, Covid was horrible. The whole Covid would be the worst possible thing they could have for a combat com unit because we 100% rely on our togetherness to get this done in our camaraderie and all that stuff was absent during this whole time. And I would definitely say that, you know, I'm not sure about the other two comments. Com units, but I know we took a step

back and as far as that goes and uh, you know, we were rebuilding things and stuff like that. Some of the unique challenges that we have here is that we're in Silicon Valley, We have a lot of people to recognize the street. We have a lot of people that don't really need this, but they love to do it. But you know, you keep them away from what we're doing for, you know, two years and then they start thinking, I really need to do this. You know, I'm kind of comfortable over here, have enough money, you know, and kind of getting some of those people back in because they listen, this is why you love it. This is why you need it. This is why we do it uh, to get them kind of back on board. And that's what we're in the process of doing now, trying to remind everybody, listen, this is what we were doing before, you know, and then move the new people who have gotten here during this horrible time. Hey, listen, this is not that is closed. Uh, what about the move and a whole other direction, you know, So I think that that's a huge challenge but that's uh if we do this properly is hopefully going to swing the momentum forward and really help us out as far as you know in our unit, how we train our outlook is our morale, everything. No so some great stuff there, right? Um and it kind of leads us to the next piece, right? So you know we get that excitement of coming in and doing their hands on and being part of the team, even though you know, maybe you're a civilian job, you really don't need. This other piece that we look at is uh the development, you know outside from the FSC training. Um So what do you guys do to develop your airmen there at the 23rd I think really just giving them that experience uh you know making sure that they are trained and holding them accountable to the standards um of the knowledge of you know the equipment and everything that they're supposed to know to be able to go out in the field and accomplish their job. Um And like we already said, you know that hands on Syrian first we put him in the classroom, train them and then now we put that knowledge to the test and um I think you just really learn more when you're out there doing it and learning on the job, you have anything to add to that chief. Yeah. Uh Exactly like you know put them out there to begin a valuable experience but as well um you know with this whole A f c. Changed things, we've kind of always coming quite a bit ago and we've already started you know we started cross training our people 12 almost two most 2.5 years ago we started the process and part of that development was we took other HFcs and put them in in with other HFcs. Uh you know our client system folks, stuff like that, we put them in there with operations, you know what I mean , kind of see exactly how how they would perform and we've gotten some outstanding results from some of our you know client systems folks in operations . Some have gone off to do some fantastic things like write software for the Air Force like big Air Force. So um you know it was it was a project that we're like listen we're all going to have to know two things, you know uh let's see what we can do right now and you know and let's give these people the opportunity, you know, we've even had some of our power bro people try learning some of our nursery stuff, our networking our transport um and that's because they want to learn it and you have people willing to teach them. So uh there's a whole lot of development going on as well as professional development and there's people who you know there's a big networking place, I hear people, people have found jobs of other people here. So there's a lot of good stuff going on both. You know, military and professional lives Gotcha? No, I think that cross

utilization is really good, right? Because you learn a different skill, you get comfortable in multiple skills and then of course when you're out in the field um if you got to fill in or help out about one of your airmen, you have that knowledge, at least some baseline knowledge there. So you kind of get that well-rounded Nous and a little bit closer tight knit team. That's awesome. Um what do you guys see is the future for your unit? What what's on the horizon for you guys? Well, I think uh the way the world is evolving, I think we're going to see a lot more support requests come up with exercises, contingencies, real world missions. Um even last minute requests um Historically I think there's three combat comes in the reserves. You know, I think historically they were strategically placed. We have one on the West Coast, one on the East Coast and one in the middle and historically, you know, we've supported our A. O. R. Uh in the past, where are our region being at Travis Air Force Base, we were supporting pacific region. Um But I think these days it's just more of a divide and conquer. We're supporting missions all around the world all around the country um regardless of our location. So I think we're just going to see more missions come up and requests for combat on support. Um and then uh yeah, just and then with the conversion coming up, that just provides more flexibility um for folks to fill in on certain what? Okay. And you see already an uptick with the exercises. I know that as we've pivoted um from you know, the Middle East, uh and the war on terror. And you see an uptick in those contingency exercises now with that pivot. Yeah, I mean I just a command of the squadron uh in august and we were already at that time supporting two exercises rest wagon, patriot warrior simultaneously. Um and we are on a regular deployment cycle. So, so our op tempo is extremely high. Where you know, not only are we preparing for that deployment cycle every few years, um, and making sure people and equipment are ready to deploy, but we're filling in on exercises and contingencies in the years in between two. So it's important for us to always make sure our people are ready to go out the door at a moment's notice our equipment is being maintained and ready to be deployed as well. Um so it's extremely high op tempo and our unit awesome. I know that that definitely appeals to a number of airmen out there. Um, I wonder if I could ask you guys a couple of personal questions I want to know what excites you the most about your unit and your mission. Well, what excites me most? Right. So I have never been the type of person that just blocks to sit behind a desk and type, you know, I know certain people do and that's fine. I've always been very big and computer networking and I've done pretty much every single AF is either is um, and here are two shooters as well. Uh, but I've never been the type of spices sit behind a desk and kind of do that stuff kind of forced to now. Yeah, chief. Uh, but we still kind of get out there and, and uh, but I like touching stuff. I like being out there. You know, we have a lot of, we have a long history of that. Most of our, she's still like to get out there in the field because it's in us. You know, it's one of those things, it's like, I like being out there in the middle of nowhere with the folks and then, hey, let's do this. Let's see if we can get this done. You know what I mean? Probably a personal challenge myself whether or not I can do this and sometimes it sucks and I don't know. What have you heard from the other ones that I've never had, it forced our experience. I don't even think I've had to have our experience, but uh, as far as out there, you know what I mean? Some of that stuff. It sucks. But you suffer

together and you come out a much better team from it. Uh you get a much better sense of police and satisfaction when it's the nastiest, you know and you come out on top and you're able to do this, it's all about the challenge. You've got to have some kind of challenge, you gotta have some kind of drive, you have to you have to want to do it, you have to want to get after it. Um you know and that's what excites me because I still like doing it, you know what I mean? I'm not sure that I could you know do the other ones, you know I'm pretty sure a lot of people like me to try. But as far as like excitement goes, that's what it is, it's all about excitement, you know. And here the 23rd were great. We have a great location. I have great people here, you know, I think we have a great team. Well you know, TR wise and full time wise, I really couldn't really couldn't ask for more. Um Yeah absolutely that's what that's what excites me about this, you here, I have the people resources do it and I love it and the challenge that I get from it. Yeah I can attempt to uh chief excitement level when he's out there talking to folks about equipment and uh field training. Um E. P. R. is not so much for him. Uh But yeah that's very exciting. Um Sorry I didn't mean did I cut you off? No ma'am I was going to ask you what excites you about the unit and the mission as well. Uh So I can speak to the TR perspective because I am a TR commander. Uh So I drill one weekend a month. Um and for me the excitement there is I have a regular full time job during the weekdays and you know it's one of those typical 9-5 jobs. It's mostly a desk job. So the excitement for me is actually coming to the unit and same thing getting out there and doing something not typical that a lot of people I don't know really do. Um you know my friends and family and it's exciting to get out there and be in the field and occasionally has the chance to participate in some big missions around the world. You know we've been all over the place um this unit and uh yeah it excites me to be able to participate in something bigger than what I think I do in the regular world. No. Okay awesome. Well I was wondering if you guys had any parting words for our gladiators out there. I would just say you know if there's anyone out there who enjoys getting their hands seeing some unique places around the country around the world and just have a strong sense of teamwork and being a part of something big. Uh, you know, definitely look into our unit, we're in here in sunny California. Uh, so definitely always on the lookout for good people. Gotcha, awesome chief. Anything dad, it's pretty much the same, you know, the same thing, you know, uh, if you're thinking about it, I know that it's not always going to be great. You know, it's just gonna be hard hot, you know, but if you're into that kind of stuff and you still love your job as far as, you know, um anything in any three D. Field, anything like that, um you know, come on down. That's what we do. That's why I tell the recruiters the first thing I asked when someone wants to be a part of the day, I got this person, but do they know what we do? Like do they know what we do? You know, and I and I and I give it, I give him the real deal and if that's, if that's still what they want and welcome to it, but just kind of, you know, it's not always great. But at the end of the day, if you're personally get satisfaction from challenge to do it Awesome. Now I really appreciate both of your time today, sharing what you guys love about your, you know what you're gonna does. Um it's great and I'm hoping that our listeners out there, learned a little bit about the 23rd today. Maybe we can find some recruits for you. I know I'm sold. I'd be out there in a heartbeat if given the opportunity, but I get strapped down

here just as just as much as you do chief. So, uh, thank you guys again. Thank you for all you that you do, uh, gladiators out there. Thank you for everything you do. You guys do. Thank you for, uh, your sacrifices. And remember, let's get after our enemy and stab him in the face through cyberspace.