

Ep. 14: Leadership discussion on suicide

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Welcome to the Sword and Shield podcast. I'm Colonel Rick Erredge. - [Howard] And I'm Chief Christopher Howard. - [Rick] Hey and welcome back, chief. It seems like it's been awhile since we've been together here doing a podcast. - [Howard] I think it has, sir, right. Well, you know, if you look at the timeline, right? We've had your change of command and now you're the wing commander. And we had our last conversation was right after that. And then we've had the long month of August kind of come in and you taking on those duties and then all the meetings that we've had when we're getting close to end of the fiscal year. So it has been a few days sir. - [Rick] Yeah, it's been crazy. We've got some really good feedback on the podcast and it, anytime we mentioned to somebody about, do you want to be a part of the podcast? We always get the affirmative. So people are lining up. - [Howard] Oh yes, definitely. And we've had some great guests so far, right? I mean, if we look back, we've had all of our new group commanders come on board, our new vice wing commander and a few special guests. So it's been, it's been fun and exciting so far. That's for sure. - [Rick] Yeah, that's excellent. So that kind of leads us into today's topic. September is suicide prevention month. And so we're going to focus our podcasts this month on that. And so this is part of the kind of a mini series of that. We're just going to kind of talk about some of our experiences and what we, what we think about as leaders in our organization, kind of what we've focused on in the past. So do you have any thoughts to kind of get us started here on what, what you think about? - [Howard] Right, so when we talk about suicide prevention, there's a lot of thoughts that come into play, right? We have our, our normal training, but I think it's more inflective or introspective for me. I'm sure that much, like many other leaders had some personal experiences of dealing with people that I know. And then just the uncomfortable piece of the having the conversation, right? And I think that as we get after it this month and we talked more to Francis and we see some of those aspects and then even going back to my Sergeant days, I think about all of the resources that individuals don't necessarily know about. And then some of the stories of, of how those resources really are truly helpful. So me personally, I think about, you know, the Military Family Life Consultant, the MFLCs, they're individuals that are available through the Family Readiness Center. And they are trained professionals that are contracted out. You have a finite number. I think it's around 10 that you can actually go talk to them before you have to move on or they refer you to another professional for professional help. And me personally, actually, I've had some rough times in my life and I've actually went out to the Military Family Life Consultant and actually had conversations with them a number of times

to kind of work through some of those things, knowing that there'd be some negative, you know, ramifications at least internally and coming to find out that externally there were none. I actually had a great neighbor, a captain that lived across the street from me that saw that I was having some issues dealing with some things. And he reached out to the chaplain and the chaplain reached out to me and then also made sure that I had some time and walk me to the MFLC at one point to make sure that I could get through that hard time in my life. So as there's a negative connotation there in our minds, I would say that in the reality it's predominantly internal, that that conflict really resides. - [Rick] Yeah. I don't think it's a, and I don't see any conflict either. Obviously we all got different experiences and over my 26 years in the air force, I think I've seen a significant change in the way we approach that. We've used the family counselors as well for the family. And we actually met in the office and it was like no big deal. And so it was really helpful. It helped us get through, you know, a couple of things with the kids and exposed them to the concept of them just asking for help, right? - [Howard] Right. - [Rick] And that I tell them all the time that asking for help is a positive character trait. And I think we need to think about it that way because really there's so many stresses going on right now in people's lives. And we try to keep track of them. And just those, you know, on the news all the time. Just COVID, social unrest, people's financial status as reservists balance and civilian work and the job and the family those things are kind of always there. And you never know when that one thing may be the thing that somebody says, "Hey, I just, I can't deal with this. It's really hard to get past this." And we want to encourage everybody to seek help anywhere. - [Howard] Right. - [Rick] Inside or outside system too. - [Howard] True, right? And we internalize things in tend to kind of exasperate it in our own minds quite often. That's what I learned with talking to the MFLC at one point. You know, when you're trying to break out, is this a failure upon my part, right? Dealing with that particular problem or just not being able to see past that particular problem. And then all of the internal conversations that happen in your head, just keep on feeding into that. And without getting that external conversation going that internal conversation just builds up and then it just builds up and then it builds up to a point where you're it's just a extremely uncomfortable and you've rationalized or painted yourself emotionally into a corner, right? So I think that getting that help is very, very unnecessary. And you know us as leaders breaking down the barriers of the stigma of that, that as good wingman, it's my job to make sure you get there, get to that external help so that you can get outside of that internal conversation and break down some of those things and find out what you can control. What are some of the tools? I know that Francis has, again, has a lot of tools out on hand that she's going to share with us over the next month of how to get out of that cycle. And then also help yourself find that external support so that you don't get yourself painted emotionally or rationally into some kind of corner internally. - [Rick] Yeah, I've, I've used a number of techniques throughout my career that have been effective and sometimes it's, "Hey, let's go for a ride." Right? And we ended up at the, the chaplain's office and do a positive handoff with somebody. Sometimes it's call the chaplain and go, "Hey, chaplain, I need you to come through the office. Just need you to do kind of a morale check. And oh, by the way, I need you to stop and talk, you know, to this person or stop in this office or

stop in this pod or this group of people and have a chat." And, you know, it works. And there's a number of those resources and all it takes is somebody that just ask and we're training our leaders and telling people to kind of be on the lookout for that. Look for those signs even more than the traditional signs, you know, that lead to suicide. We want to, we want to get there early and prevent it before those things kind of pile on and keep people from letting that work up. And maybe it doesn't always end up in a suicide. Maybe it ends up in other trouble where people react, you know, in a negative way. - [Howard] Right. - [Rick] And with whether that ends up in some sort of incident that kind of puts their, puts them on a path where in the future that leads to, - [Howard] Right. - [Rick] It leads to an issue. - [Howard] [indistinct] right, so as the stressors build up and if we are unable to break out of that cycle and we have a negative reaction, whether it's a, an outburst or whether it's, you know, destructive behavior, then that just exasperates the situation, right? So now let's say we have a situation where you're, maybe I lost my cool and yelled at somebody. And now, okay, now I'm in the corner because now you're that guy or you're that girl. And if we, as leaders don't then engage in that, that situation and go, "Okay, what happened here? Let's break this down. What are the underlying situations?" Then that person can be even more cornered in that situation. And then they've painted themselves into part because of those actions. And then that just adds to it. And I think that's what you're going with, right? So, it could lead to even further problems. - [Rick] Yeah, and then it's the pile on effect I think, is, is what I think about a lot. And making sure that we're trying to nip in the bud as early as we can and get people that help. And I know it's hard for us because we don't get to see everybody. - Right - Every day like the regular Air Force side does. You know, and they still have a lot of problems with suicide. And the air force is still so on track this year to, to reach the number that we did in 2019. - [Howard] Which was a pretty high number. - [Rick] Pretty high number. And so I know there's a lot of concern, a lot of talk about it. That's kind of why we want to focus this month on, on just talking about it and making sure people are comfortable asking for help and in getting the resources they need. And, you know, I heard I heard the COMMACC, commander of ACC, talk about, they did a study in ACC over a couple of years and they looked at all the cases, mental health cases that they had and looked at how many of those actually ended up in a security clearance problem. And it was less than 1%. - [Howard] Right. - [Rick] And then he made the comment. Those 1% probably shouldn't have been in the air force anyways. Those are people with really serious mental health problems - [Howard] Right. - [Rick] That somehow were able to cope with it for a significant part of their lives. - [Howard] Right. - [Rick] And finally, they just, they, they broke and really needed help. So that makes me really comfortable with people asking for help because our system now seems to be better. I'm not saying it's perfect. - [Howard] Right. - [Rick] But we are getting better, I think about understanding that mental health is an illness, just like any other illnesses and we should treat it that way. And even if, maybe it, maybe it leads to somebody being, being on some sort of profile for awhile to get them healthy and safe and then we get them back. But we don't jump to use security clearance right away. - [Howard] Right, no, definitely sir, right? And then that kind of leads me to some of the things I learned in leadership as a Sergeant. I was actually able to talk to an individual and

come to find out about a year and a half later, he came to me and said, "You know, Sergeant, if it hadn't been that conversation that you and I had, I was going out driving onto the coast and jumping off the cliff. So thank you." You know, and to me, I didn't even realize that it was that significant, but it came down to based on that conversation that member and I had was, you know, a genuine concern and having a genuine conversation with him and being able to, you know, talk to him through the problem and actually just offload everything, right? I had meetings. I had a lot of things going on. I had a couple of people we were knocking on my door, but I made it very clear that this was the priority today. This member was the priority and took the time to have an honest conversation with that member and help them work through it, right? There was nothing I could personally do to prevent what was going on in this person's life. Had it been a medical issue that was just compounding, but taking the time to be honest with them and open up and have a good conversation and have a legitimate honest conversation and not just have a touch point made all the difference in that particular situation. - [Rick] In that case, right? You had no idea. - No, - And so we don't, right? But you made a connection with them. And I think that's important to, important to people that you just are there for them and open up cause you never know. - Right. - You don't know what people are dealing with. People have a way to compartmentalize. - [Howard] Right, yes it is. (Crosstalk) - [Rick] You know, and there's just as being able to connect wingmen is what really I think is important. And you being able to do that and not knowing it. That shouldn't bring you some satisfaction. I mean, and personally, I would think about how that's save. - [Howard] Right. I mean, so there's the good and bad, right? So that was a great story. You know, again, as in a leadership role, I've had external members that I was part of, right? People in my community that I've had conversations with and I missed some of the signs or I wasn't able to pick up on them. You know, I had an individual that I knew, okay, right? We weren't friends. We interacted. We had a few missions together. We even had a beer or two together over some times. And someone that had talked to me about mentorship on occasion that I've talked to them and helped develop them out and didn't catch anything and ended up losing that airmen to suicide. And this one of those other things that, you know, you try to balance it out internally of what could I have done better? How could I have missed this situation? And it comes down to that piece that you said, sir, is compartmentalization of some of those things. And then also I don't think I ever really had genuine conversation with that particular individual. And that's something that you kind of tried to work with. And one more piece that I try to learn as a leader that it's really important to make that, that connection as much as possible. Is it always possible? No. Are there going to be times where it's just a touch point, hey, how are you doing and not necessarily make that connection? Sure. But if given the opportunity always try to strive for that, that connection with our airmen. - [Rick] Yeah, I always try to look people in the eye too, when I, you know, when you have that. Even if it's a short, - Yes. - Like, hey how you doing? It's not like just running down the hallway. It's, hey, how you doing? Like I'm with you. Like you mean a lot of times you can read. And especially now when people are wearing masks. I think you know it's a little harder to pick up on what's going on. - Right. - But if you, if you listen to their voice and if they're out of their kind of their normal

conversational dialogue, - Right - Or you can see it in their eyes sometimes that something's just not right. So take sometime to say something. - [Howard] Yeah, right. A lot of nonverbals there, right? So if we, again, if we stay engaged with our airmen, again, in leadership roles sometimes it can be very hard to stay engaged at the lower level, but just good situational awareness of this is how the demeanor I know that airman so and so has. And this is the demeanor and attitude that I know that captain so-and-so has. And if that changes, are we engaged enough? And do we feel comfortable enough that I can ask you a captain? How's the day going? You seem a little off today. Hey, airman, you know, I noticed that you're not engaged as much, what's going on? What kind of stress was going on? And then all the items that you brought up at the beginning of the conversation, especially now, right? We don't, we're not seeing individuals. So how are we really engaging? And how much effort are we taking to make sure that we know what's going on with our airmen, with their finances, with the fact that now they've been cooped up with their family for six months. - [Rick] Or maybe not a family. - [Howard] Or not at all. - [Rick] If they don't have anybody where they are. - [Howard] Yeah, exactly. - [Rick] I think there's, there's responsibility for everybody here, right? It's just, it's not a leadership problem. - [Howard] No. - [Rick] this is a human race problem, internal and external to the air force. And we all need to do something about it. And that is having that conversation and in connecting with our airmen and just finding out what's going on in their lives. And knowing what, knowing what's going on in somebody's life enough to know that when that's maybe out of the norm for them, - Right. - That there's some sort of signal there for you. - [Howard] Yeah, and internally to the family as well, right? So a lot of us have teenage children. It's really easy for them to get roped into the cyber side of the house, kind of compartmentalize their life into this screen. Into this world that you and I might not necessarily know. So how are we staying engaged with that? Knowing what's going on there and having honest conversations with even our teenage kids. I know I have to make an effort with my teenage sons to reach out to them and actually talk to them. One of them, you know, it's really hard to get them to talk. So like, I'll text them, "Hey, what's going on." I call them and don't get an answer necessarily, but, you know, that's my college student and it can be kind of hard to make sure that you're engaged enough to know that everything is going forward and that they can rely on us as a parent or as a wing man. Or when it comes to our airmen. - [Rick] Yeah. I find myself doing much more deliberate engagement with my, with my teenage kids and my college kid. More so than I think my parents ever did. And I'm not, I'm not sure maybe it's just, you know, it's different times. - [Howard] Right. - [Rick] Different stressors right now with kids. Like there's a lot of, there's a lot of bullying obviously going on and it's, it's, we've kind of identified that as a significant societal problem as well. I don't think it's any more now than it was when I was growing up. And it was, it was bad. I mean, I saw some people beat up in school just for being different. - [Howard] Right - [Rick] And just kind of a shock to the system there. And, well we certainly didn't have the resources, you know, there's usually one counselor at school. And are you going to walk into the counselor, you know, all bloody and beat up? You know, to kinda rat on somebody. No and I think it was more obvious then. Because you would come home and your parents would say what happened? - Yeah. - You know, now if that's

happening online, we may or may not know it, it may push a kid to breaking point. - [Howard] Well, a kind of a term that we use in our house a little bit more is a telephone tough guy, right? When it comes to the cyber bullying, going back to date myself, a Lethal Weapon movie, where he's talking to all your telephone tough guy, right? It's real easy in the cyber realm for people who might not necessarily be so outward in bullying, but can make a comment and then pile on. And then also the fact that when we have these communities that are predominantly all cyber, how easy it is to get wrapped up and that's what what's going on in life. And it not necessarily being 100% true or even 100% real. You know, when we talk about some of the businesses that we're in within cyber, how easy it is for something else to just get tagged on and then blow up so quickly. And then the fact that back when we were kids, it might take the end of the day for a rumor to get around the high school. It takes nanoseconds for this to get around that cyber space. - [Rick] And there was accountability, I feel like in our day, right? So if you did something, you said something, it was going to meet me by the bike rack. So, you know. - Yes. - [Rick] All back, you kind of knew that you were going to have to deal with it. - [Howard] Yeah. - [Rick] And there was a little bit of policing going on. Nowadays, there's just the only accountability I think is if you find, if a parent were to find out and then they get some of the system. And so there's that, you know, that anonymous piece to - Right. - People taking advantage and the pile that on. Again I think is what can really push somebody to a breaking point. - [Howard] Agreed. And then rolling that even back to our airman, right? So even that happens to our airman where we feel like this stuff is permanent, right? So we have one mistake that happens to an airman. Maybe they have a financial hiccup and they trip themselves off. And then this other thing happens. So now they feel like, oh my gosh. I mean, there was a point as an airman that I felt like my nickname was [Indistinct]. You know, just bad luck is all like I had. And it felt like, it was just going to pile on. But I was lucky enough to have some strong NCOs that helped dust me off. And that showed me that they believed in me and helped me succeed past that, right? So I would have to hammer our again, it's really that wingman mentality of, of being able to have that conversation and explain that yes, today's sucks, right? Tomorrow is going to suck too. And it might suck for a week, it might suck for a month, it might suck for a year, but it's not going to suck forever. And how are we going to work as a team together to get there? And as a supervisor, I'm going to, I'm going to give you this opportunity to show that you're capable of learning from this mistake. And we can't do that in everything in life. But if we can say, "Hey, you've got financial issues. Let's sit down. Let's look at your finances. No judgment, let's just look at what's going on. Let's see what we can help you out balance out. What is and what is not important." You know, you, you need time with your family. Well, let's, let's go ahead and let's get some leave. Let's give you a pastime. Let's make sure that you get to counselor. Things like that that we can do in those roles as supervisors and even as peers getting into to supervision. So they get that support, right? - [Rick] Yeah, there are a lot of options out there nowadays. And then I like to say that suicide's a permanent solution to a temporary problem. - [Howard] Right. - And we don't want it. We've got other solutions, you know, that we'd rather implement than, than the permanent one. And so even if the military is not compatible with your lifestyle. And

if that's what's going to help, then I think we need to help you with that transition. - [Howard] Right. I know that we've done that on occasion for a couple of our airmen. Where it just because of the stressors, because of everything else, this just wasn't a lifestyle. And there was no harm and there was no foul and there was no negativity. It was thank you for identifying. Let's work with you as a team. I don't want to let you go until you are in a better place, but know that I'm going to help you get to that better place. And that's not going to be in this uniform, but that doesn't mean that I'm not going to care for you as a wingman all the way to the point you leave as well as I may reach out to you as a civilian to see how you're doing, right? Because it's really a family when we put this uniform on and it's not just today it's forever. That's, that's a whole thing about being a veteran. (Crosstalk) - [Rick] Yeah and if there's an opportunity I always come back, right? - [Howard] Yes. - [Rick] And so leave on good terms and make sure you're getting the care you need, whether that's inside of our institution or external to that. And then when the time's right and things are better. Absolutely, looks up, we want you back. - [Howard] Definitely, sir. No, that's some great stuff there. - [Rick] Well, I think that's important to continue the conversation all the time. And I guess what, I'll, what I'll ask everybody to do and charge everybody that you need to be on the lookout for this. And you need to always be talking to people. Especially nowadays really need you to have that communication with people, whether that's a Face Time or if you can get some sort of video chat, just check in on people. Get some eyeballs on them; make sure they're doing okay. We do have the ability to drill, - Yes, sir. - You know, impersonate your unit. So we should be thinking about that and how to rotate that in a safe manner in this COVID environment and just make those connections. However those connections are made? We need everybody to do that. Check with their network kind of continuously here and not just today, not in COVID is over, but this culture of connection is really important and resiliency for everybody. - [Howard] Yes, sir, definitely. It's always been, always be a good wingman. Always engage. - [Rick] Excellent. Well, thanks chief for continuing the conversation and we'll talk to everybody next time.