

Ep. 26: Wing year in review

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Welcome to the "Sword And Shield" podcast. I'm Colonel Rick Erredge and today I'm joined by... - Command Chief Master Sergeant Brian Bischoff. - Welcome chief. It's great to, we don't get a chance to do this a whole lot being UTA but it's great to see you and let's have a good discussion today. - Yeah, absolutely. - So I think we'll, I've been doing some thought about the past year as I often reflect. And I've thought about maybe we should talk about this year. It's been a little bit of crazy year. - Yeah, yeah, yeah. Few challenges, few ups and downs and twists and turns and stuff. So, but that builds resiliency, so. - Yeah, absolutely. - And if you think about where you were a year ago, right now, would you have projected and thought about where would be this year and what we went through? - No, but if I were able to do that I would have purchased a lot of masks and made a lot of money. So, but no, did not see that one coming. - Yeah, if we'd have known there's a lot opportunity to be entrepreneurial in nature and-- - Hand sanitizer, for sure, yeah - Absolutely and then obviously we don't know what the next year is gonna be but we just wanna talk a little bit about this year. And I think, some words that come to mind are tough, wacky, weird, stressful, sad, optimistic and not only just because of COVID but all the other things going on in the world right now too, is kind of turned this upside down. - Yeah, it does. And for a lot of people that are used to having a lot of stability and don't like change, it can be pretty tough. I always try and put stuff in perspective to those around me. I'm like, look, any day, you don't find yourself being shot at or blown up in a chow hall. It's a good day, right and having had both those happen, I'm like, hey anything short of that, it's all good. We'll work the problem. We'll figure it out it's not that bad. - Yeah I agree as well. And 2020 started off, I thought really well at least for the wing. And we had a lot of good thoughts coming off and things we were planning were coming off for one-year anniversary as a wing we had a bunch of things we wanted to do with mission partners, we want to grow. And we were slowed down somewhat as COVID kind of emerged. And I think where we are now compared to where we started, I felt like the wing responded really well. And people adapted quickly to that point that you had about change. - Yeah, yeah, absolutely. And not all the change has obviously been bad or were a challenge. We've had a lot of good change. We now have Sam in public affairs, which has been great. Thus why we're able to start doing these kinds of things, cyber block's up and running. We've had Sergeant Vielman helping out with travel vouchers and getting a lot of those fixed. So I think, not all the change has been a challenge. Some of the change has been really good and it's been good things for the unit as a whole. - Yeah and fortunately sometimes it takes an exterior stimulus to generate some of these

change. And on this case change was worldwide through the pandemic. And I found it interesting too, that when this happened my son came to me with a book he'd read called "The 12 Plagues," and he'd read it for school in sixth grade. And he's an eighth grader now. So two years ago and he still had the book and he started flipping through and he read me a section from this book that talked about all the 11 plagues throughout history. And the 12th plague was ironically, very similar to what had happened. It talked about something started in China and it started it moved through the world very quickly and had a lot of parallels to what he had. So I told him that he should write the 13th chapter to the book to find out what's next. - Yeah, absolutely. Well and so another great thing that came out of it is everybody kind of became a reservist. Right and the reason I say that is so they started feeling our challenge of, hey, I can't VPN in I can't tell telework and that was a big challenge and suddenly they were living in our world. So now obviously a lot has been invested in that infrastructure. So worked out great for those of us in the reserve where we can, we now have very robust communication systems out there to be able to do our work a little bit more efficiently whereas before, I think active duty was kind of like, yeah, yeah you guys are just whining and crying about it. And then when they had to walk a little in our shoes, they're like, well, wait a minute, this sucks. We need to get it fixed. - Yeah, that's a great point. 'Cause we've been kind of fighting some of those challenges for a long time. I've been a reservist for about 14 years. And so that's really been a challenge over time. We've tried to solve it within reserve command. We started desktop anywhere several years ago which fell in place and blossomed appropriately. But with our mission partners, yours 688th they're really interested now in maintaining this level of VPN to continue their ops. - Yeah, yeah. And I think that's the other good thing that came out of this COVID situation is being able to telework and work remotely and the additional funding that's been put for, some of those tools and techniques and then others seeing that, yes, you can do some of that and it increases your capacity and your capability everybody doesn't physically have to be sitting in the same room in order to do the job. You can telework and still be very engaged and very effective. - Yeah, that's been a great side effect. I think too, it's has some downfalls. So we talked a lot about people maintaining boundaries and being able to communicate effectively about your availability. And I found too at times, being on all the time and having a hard time of shutting off. So I think, we're going to keep talking to our airmen about, hey you gotta establish those boundaries with your supervisor especially if you're traditional. So you can balance your family life with your civilian job and then with your reserve life. And we don't expect you to do them all at the same time and you need to set those boundaries to make sure you're healthy and can continue at the pace that we need you to participate with us. - Yeah and I think it's also very important, kind of like we had talked with Colonel Linnaean and a lot of the research he had done with University of Michigan is just setting expectations and having good communication, both up and down the members setting good expectations with their supervisors and vice versa. So that way everybody's on the same page. And obviously when you're not face-to-face with people it's very easy for communication to be misconstrued. So setting those expectations and in staying in constant communication, I think is incredibly important especially if you can do it visually, doing VTC stuff since that's where

most of all your non-verbals are coming through you that doesn't really come across in an email or a text. So I think the more, eyeball-to-eyeball communication, you can get even if it's over a computer helps get rid of any of those misconceptions or misunderstandings. - And I know it helped me and it forced me to learn more about people and the people I work with in general to understand kinda what their challenges are personally what's going on in their life. So I think that's a positive as well. And I've seen some people reach out for help. Like, hey, I'm struggling at this point what resources is there? Can you help me here? I got these challenges. I need to shape my life a little differently. And I think those are all good things 'cause it'll help us retain that person in understanding what they're going through at that time and what they need for support - Absolutely, now that we have a counselor on board, that's another great addition we've had to the team and to the family here, has been great. And I understand she's been, very engaged and very busy with a lot of folks reaching out to her, which is great. We've been trying to get that position filled for quite some time. And now we've got a first round draft pick we got in there and she's just crushing it and able to really help all of our folks out, which is what's critically important. - Yeah it's great. You mentioned a couple of those key positions that we've been able to fill and we're going to continue to do that. And we're almost full up now, the fight will be to increase what our capacity is and be able to tell our story about how we need some more authorizations for these functions to really function as a true wing. So we got some FM folks on board. We doubled the size of our FM shop as well. Of course, we have Sam on board helping us. And then you mentioned Francis and the front office is full. And so lots of good things have happened throughout the year here, staffing up. And we've used a lot of RPA wisely, I think with the cyber block and that's been, a real big focus of yours that I jumped on board and we've really pushed that hard. So we've seen a dramatic decrease in their overdue travel vouchers, went from like 1.4 million down to about 400,000 right now. So I think that's a huge success that we should celebrate as well. - Yeah, absolutely. I know when I got here a year and a half ago that was Colonel Jone's, first thing she brought it to me, she said, "Chief if you can fix the voucher issues "that we're having," she said, "That's a win. "I don't care if you don't get anything else done, "if we get that good, we get that greened up "then that's a win." And that was a big concern of everybody that I talked to when I first got here. So it's been great to, be able to have the resources that we can start implementing some of those things and getting a lot of that stuff greened up and not only our finance folks, but Sergeant Vielman very engaged on it and being able to help folks and get things done in a quick and efficient manner and getting people paid. So that's the other good part out of that. I don't know anybody that's allergic to cash. So it's always good getting, some money in some folks pocket. - Yeah, again, more side effects of that is that we learned a lot about the process and where the specific challenges are and the roadblocks within the process of getting these vouchers a lot of supply, some pressure to it and then find out where we can exert influence to change that. And so not only are we getting people paid but I think overall it's gonna be better in the long run for all of the reservists 'cause we understand how to navigate the system better. - Well, I think the other big wins that we haven't talked about a lot and probably not a lot of people are aware of is when you were able to engage with the

five-oh second to handle the whole GPC card issue, right. That's something that we'd been fighting forever and a day trying to get GPC cards down to the squadron level. And you were able to dig in there and find the proper verbiage where we could kind of force their hand and say, yeah you do have to provide them down to the squadron. So I know in the squadron superintendents I've talked to were very excited about finally getting a GPC and able to start doing purchases for their for their folks there, especially the combat comm guys. - Yeah so it blew my mind that some things that seem so institutional and process-wise should be fixed, became so hard. So, I really didn't do much other than encourage the team to go find solutions. They brought back the solution and we just applied it got some training done. And again, something as small as getting people a GPC card to take care of our airmen can have a huge effect on the retention and the mission and just their happiness and health overall as an American citizen. - Absolutely and then CG working on all of the MOAs and MOUs and everything. And a lot of those getting signed will help out tremendously, not only in our interaction with the 433rd for defining roles of who's responsible for what. But also, all those that we had to get set up there at the different bases. So that way we've got folks that can get lodging and access the different facilities from the host post wings that are there. So again more good forward progress I think all in all in things progressing as we get more and more mature as an organization. - Yeah, so I've seen some kind of a snowball effect kind of continue here. We've got a couple of A plans signed you mentioned MOUs, we're really close to getting that 433rd MOU done. They're meeting this week, goals get that done before January UTAs. And we'll share that with everybody. So you all can understand exactly what the expectations are for us and for our mission partners specifically 433rd. And so we're getting these things in place and then we'll be able to kind of accelerate further change we need to do. And as a launching point for kind of what's next. And so what kind of things do you think about for next year that we need to focus on? - Yeah, so I would personally I think we need to continue getting more of our structure put in place. I think we're doing a good job at getting kind of the framework put in place, but we're not quite ready to paint drywall just yet. So I think getting more of our processes squared away. So we integrate well with the 433rd and then we also integrate well with 10th Air Force and then up to AFRC making sure that we're producing good solid products. So that way we don't get things returned. That's what's been great about having Sergeant Vielman doing some cross checking on vouchers before they go up. So, we want to make sure that we're doing our due diligence. We're making sure that we're getting a couple of sets of eyeballs on stuff before it comes up to up to the wing or goes outside of the wing. So that way we're not having to do a lot of rework. And I think that will clear up a whole lot of frustration there. And then at the same time we want to make sure we're continuing to develop our future leaders. As I was saying to some folks yesterday you and I aren't going to be in the seat forever and we need to develop the next folks that are going to be coming on up. So I think continuing to make sure that we're developing our big A airmen is also incredibly important. - Yeah, that's something that, when you're kind of building a wing and doing all these little business process institutional things that wings have been around forever have already got in place. Sometimes you gotta divide your time and it doesn't always

give the time you need the professional development. And so I think that's a really important piece here. As we grow as a wing we wanna grow our leaders and we want them to, fly the nest, get out of the coop, get out there to other parts of the cyber community get some more developments, experience broadening and then come back to the wing and bring that experience back to us and help us do better and continue to grow. I think our mission partner relationships are really strong right now probably stronger than they've ever been. We'll continue to focus on those, I think as well. And that helps from all the things we talk about far as business process and the piece as well. I think a highlight for me has been the professional development committee how the two wings, our wing, the 433rd have worked really good together. And frankly, we've seen some people step up and tackle some things that maybe would not have had the opportunity if COVID never happened. - Right, yeah. And matter of fact, I got a lot of good feedback from Chief Column when I talked to her yesterday and she said, man, you guys are just crushing it with the professional development committee and getting a lot of that information out there. So I think there's a lot of great resources that are available and really I just wanna make sure that people are, one, aware that the resources are out there and number two are taking advantage of those resources. And because it's free. It doesn't get any cheaper than free, right. So whether you're working on your education or your professional development or whatever, just take advantage of it now, because when you're no longer wearing this uniform it's not free anymore. And it gets real expensive real quick. - Yeah absolutely. And I think, what I think about is that it's not all rainbows unicorns and those are the things that you and I are trying to tackle along with the bigger team. And there's still a lot of work to do but I think the path we're on I feel good about where we've come in a short period of time and where we're headed. And I think the longer this goes and the better we get the clear that path becomes of what we need to focus on and fix for people. And I'm looking forward to the UEI in June because I think I feel really good about where we are and I want them to come in and give us good luck. It'll be the first one let's establish kind of where we are and they'll help us focus on those things. Maybe that will need more attention from us as well. - Absolutely and that's the other thing I wanna make sure that we're doing as a personal goal for me is to, make sure that we're getting rid of the self-inflicted gunshot wounds right? The low-hanging small stuff that causes so much consternation and just, is kind of a real pain in the butt that is completely preventable. So, I think if we get those things out of the way kind of like the whole Maslow's hierarchy of needs right? If we get the baseline done and the small stuff is not biting you in the butt then you can start focusing up on your higher needs that you have out there and more strategic things and so forth. So I think we've made a lot of great progress in there and I think we're going to make a lot of great progress in the next year. It's just a matter of finally getting the pieces into place to be able to execute on some of those things. - Yeah, we've see some indications of we're kind of stepping up on the stage and doing some things. Some of the things I want to highlight is our retention is really, really good. And when we look at it compared to the 433rd then compared to 10th Air Force we're rate like in the top five units. So people enjoy what they're doing in our business. I think they see the progress and there's hope that things are going to continue to get better. When you continue to

focus on them and they feel like this business we're in cyber there's so much opportunity and we're trying to figure out what's next for us. And I think, we'll maybe get some clarification on some of those things in the next year as well. And we met with General Scobey and did a presentation for him about the election security, pre-election and post-election, and in that discussion, he continues to talk about space cyber and ISR is where the future is. And there's a growth area there. And I think, the sky's the limit for us. - Yeah, absolutely. Anybody you talk to cyber is a growth business and it's going to continue to grow. And I see more and more investment being made there in the people, in the training, in the schools, in the equipment because that's something that you have to go all in on you can't hold short on that and hope that things go well, because we all know it's not going to. So, I think the great thing about that is that's going to give our people options and choices and a lot of coolness factor of the different things they're gonna be able to do that directly impact this country its security. - Yeah, so when it comes to change, right we talk a lot about change. I don't think it's in our business, changes constant. So I think the thing we can always rely on is change and who knows what the challenge is going to be next year. - Well, right. And that's one of the other things why I try and tell everybody, hey, even when you're doing your CBTs, right do your CBTs and pay attention to all these things because you never know when you're gonna have to use those kinds of skills or start working a problem, like you said before nobody saw the whole COVID thing coming and wearing masks and so on and so forth. So, what's the next big thing coming around the corner. And are you prepared for it? Did you pay attention to the training that you've taken and are you prepared to be able to handle whatever it comes up with little to no external guidance beyond the training that you've received? So to me that's important. That's something we do have control over is we've got a lot of great training in a lot of different areas that we can pay attention to something as simple as your self aid buddy care, right. You'd never know you don't have to be downrange. You can be here locally. And you're the first one to roll up on an accident whether you save somebody and the family that's potentially in the car could heavily depend on did you pay attention to that CBT? Or were you just clicking through it? So, we don't know what's coming next but I think being prepared and using the tools we have in our toolbox will get us in a much better place for that and cut down our stress of the unknown. - Yeah, that's a great point because you and I weren't trained to deal with a pandemic right. 100 years, maybe 100 years is a pandemic roughly we weren't trained for that but all the other training and opportunities and experiences we've had has somewhat prepared us. And at the end of January last year or this year, January 2020, I was at the wing commander and vice commander course and stuff was starting. You start to bubble and hear about something going on in China about a bug and we didn't really pay attention but the senior leader in the course said you will have an opportunity to lead in a crisis. So every wing commander, every group commander, every squadron commander, every squadron superintendent, group soup and wing command chief during their career will have a crisis that they need to lead through. Little did we know that it would be a pandemic at that time in the class the biggest struggle for the Reg F wing commanders was base housing and the mold issue, right? And so that was a significant issue. So now we're gonna throw a pandemic on top of it social

unrest on top of it, we've got lots of opportunities to lead and we're gonna need everybody in the wing to lead at their level and help us through this and share their experiences and training. And for me is the feedback loop is really important. - Absolutely and capturing those lessons learned. And the good ideas that we were able to implement is crucial. So as someone who lives in a panhandle of Florida, when we get thwacked by a hurricane, first thing you do is all right, hey what are the lessons learned from previous hurricanes that we can implement now to make sure that we're getting back to normal as fast as possible. So I think capturing those things and folks sending up, hey, here's how we're doing business here so we're able to attack that problem and be able to improvise, adapt and overcome is huge because everybody may not be thinking along the same line. So if you come up with a good solution, share it with everybody. So that way everybody can take advantage of it. - Yeah you never know what you're going to need to use it. And we don't know what next year is going to look like. So there's a lot of optimism. I think the glass is half full. The future's bright for us going into next year. And we really look forward to tackling all your problems out there and developing leaders to help us solve these problems. Chief and I can't solve them all. We're here to break glass, break down roadblocks but we need the whole team on board to help solve these. - Yeah, absolutely. It's like one of my previous commanders said, we're like offensive linemen. Our job is open up holes in the line and let everybody else run with the ball through there. So, open up holes of opportunity and letting folks run with the ball because that's how they're going to learn. That's how they're going to grow. And that's how they're going to be ready to be the next wing commander or command chief. And that's what it's all about. - Yup, so next year, we're going to continue to focus on our three priorities of empower airmen and their families optimize their readiness and continue to execute the mission. And we'll focus on initiatives to solve problems within those make everybody's life a lot easier. So I just want to wish everybody a happy holiday and I know it's going to be rough and different this year find the optimism in it and find things to be grateful for. So I'm grateful for you. I'm grateful for Sam, I'm grateful for everybody in the wing and hope to continue to lead and get opportunities to make our airmen shine. - Yeah, absolutely. I feel the same way. I'm thankful for everybody we have within this wing and all the awesome work they're doing. I'm thankful for the opportunity to continue to wear this uniform 'cause there's a lot of people that don't have that opportunity. And I think it's important that we kind of, do an internal check of what we have to be thankful for and what things are going well and what things are going right in our lives. And not always focus on what's going sideways, and sometimes you do have stuff going sideways but when you do realize that you're part of a team and the team's there to support you and whatever it is you're going through. So, if you're having some challenges, reach out ask for some help and we solve it as a team, sometimes it's tough if you're isolated or alone, me, it works great. 'Cause now I don't have family coming over to my house for the holidays. So that's less work I've gotta do. So that's my positive spin on it. But yeah, so I wish everybody a happy holidays out there. Hopefully it's great for you. And like I said, just take stock of what you got in your kit and be appreciative of it. - Yep chief, I appreciate that. I appreciate you and we will put 2020 behind us in the rear view mirror and take what we learned and

implement it for next year. And we'll continue to get after those things we need to do next year too, so. - Absolutely. - Great seeing you. - Sounds good. - Thanks everybody for joining us for this podcast. And we'll be back again next week.
(Upbeat music)