

## Ep. 9.2: Col. Silas Darden

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Good morning gladiators and welcome to the next episode of the leadership profile. With me today, I've Colonel Silas Darden, who is the new 960th vice commander. Welcome. - Hey, thanks, sir, good to be here. Just came up from the 860th I'm glad to be joining the Wings today. - This is excellent, yeah, and I think I say this every time, but I'm like, I'm really excited to have this discussion with you I'm excited to have you as part of the team. I think you feel, I really need a gap in my knowledge from you being in the Wing a long time and then the Combat Comms not really strength of mind. And so I think we're going to make a really good team and I'm looking forward to working with you. - I'll keep hearing that. And so hopefully these next few, a couple of years, I won't let you down. I don't want to overpromise and under-deliver, but I hope to deliver to those expectations, - Now I think you'll be fine. And, you know, we, we tend to fill each other's gaps and y'all experienced a lot of respect and a lot of those connections and network, so it's gonna work out really well. So today I just wanna talk a little bit about who you are and introduce you to the Wing kind of some of the things and thoughts, and maybe some, some of those things you have in your book over there, you can share with us from a leadership lessons or just interesting thoughts and, you know, so people get a chance to know you, in a distributed manner Wing. Sometimes it's tough to get out and see everybody, meet everybody. You probably know way more people in the Wing than I do, but as, as time goes we'll get an opportunity to kinda share our vision for the entire Wing and where we wanna go as command team and with our priorities and what our strategic vision is. So, I could think the first thing I'm interested in is kind of just give us a little bit about, hey, where are you been and kind of maybe what you do in your civilian life. Now that you're going to be a TR and, and I think it's really interesting what you do and kinda to bring those skills into your role here as a, as a leader in the Wing. - Sure so I will try to sum up my career in a minute or less in the interest of everybody's time, but I started on active duty as a Missile and then quickly rolled into the, the, the Reserve world first in space. And then in cyber testing, all those are called something different back in the day and then rolled into the IMA world still, but went back to be Combat Comm after a staff tours, working as a speechwriter to the Cafe and then working in legislative liaison at Air Force ACO as AFRC, and a couple of joint jobs in between. And then I came to the group as the deputy, the first deputy under Colonel Terry, when the group was, was back then a very, very, very new thing. And I know we're going to get into that a little bit. Was fortunate enough to get selected for the det 2 job which subsequently became 860th COG. So a wide varieties of experiences all over the place, but a lot of time in the 960th Wing's

predecessor organization. - Yeah, that's great. So, you know, you got time of squadron commander, group commander, and now at the Wing level, and, and I also think having you be in all those different statuses, right, you've been just about every status you've got all your pillars filled really makes you a well rounded person. And in the Reserve, a lot of times we don't get a chance to maybe do all those just 'cause of the way you participate, but it's gonna be critical for us to continue to mentor our folks think in the future about having those experiences to make sure that we're, we're developing the right people for those leadership roles - Yeah, so I, you know, I tell folks don't walk past a mentorship opportunity. And so I mentor a lot of officers, both in the, the active components, as well as the reserve component. I've been fortunate enough to have a great reserve career because I've had the opportunity to continue on in pressing my civilian career and been a moderately successful with that, and then been able to do everything I wanted to do as a reservist. And I said that being reserved as provided me, kind of opened up the world in terms of things I was able to do, details working on White House initiatives and other things. And so for those active component officers that are considering some reserve experiences, it's not just kinda the cookie cutter or looking at somebody's bio and saying, "I must do those things in order to achieve this goal." Like you can really have the career you want as a reservist. And I think every reservist already knows that. - And I talk a lot about on-ramps and off-ramps right, and finding the right status to serve at the right time, based on your family, or what's going on. If somebody is going to school, they got a chance to maybe dial it back a little bit and be a TR and IMA, and then maybe it's time that they want to be full time. And I think you've done that in showing that you've been able to kinda navigate some of those certainly there's challenges and figuring out how to do that. So do you have any tips or things mentoring you'd like to share of timing-wise? You think about what's, what's, what worked for you anyways? - Yeah, I think that, that one misnomer that we all need to appreciate early on in our careers is it's okay to say no, right. I think that we believe will be boarded off the Island in some manner or form if we tell a senior leader, no. And that is not the case. Now we have to understand there are risks there, personally, professionally saying no, but we also have to make what is our life goals, kind of our guiding light. And so for me, made decisions over time to tell people no, because those decisions conform with where I wanted my life personally, professionally to head. Sometimes it took a bit of a risk, It was an opportunity that otherwise would really wanted, but I couldn't take at the time, but always landed on my feet, continued perform and got other opportunities. And so for those folks that are for the listeners out there, I would say, start out with a plan, right. If you could present an opportunity to senior leader, come say, "Hey, really, really nice for you to come do this." Be willing to say no, because it's not a time. And just provide that message that, that are really would like to do this for you, but I can't right now, because I have this thing that I'm working on, that's more important right now to me. And I think senior leaders appreciate that you're honest and are willing to come back to you when there's another opportunity that they can. - Yeah, that's great advice, and it's really hard to do. Some people feel this need to want to please everybody, and they feel like they're not going to get that next opportunity. And I've talked about in previous podcasts with me is that I've been a

guy taking advantage of opportunities, and then you never know when you going to come in you should always be ready. So you've been number one. And so you're number one group commander date two into the 860th and number one group deputy, what would you tell people about trying to like really step out and be part of something that's brand new and maybe way different than they've seen before? What, what kind of things are you feeling and what kind of risks and challenges did you see associated with that? - Yes so, I did get some heads up in preparation for this conversation. You mentioned my book. And so I do have a book and I've been looking over my experiences at 860th and what I took into that job and other jobs and so you, you, you, you joke with me about carrying a book around, I do carry a book around for, anybody's gonna see me, and it has little bits of tidbits of information. But one of the things I pulled out of my book in preparation for that question, thank you sir, was the better than XXX, right. And so stepping into the 860th, one of the goal or the date two even, one of the goals I had was to, to be better than XXX. And so we wanted to look at those measures of effectiveness as an organization to look at predecessor organizations or sister organizations, or even our active component partner organizations, and say, is that a metric we can or measure we can take, and can we be better at it then. Now for some, we fell flat on our face because we were new organization, but in some cases we were work out policies, practices, or as we call 'em the military TTPs that enabled us to have better measured outcomes, right. And I think that was the, the ultimate goal. So, you know, some people say, if you're, if you're shooting for something and you miss the mark, you still fared better than you otherwise would if you didn't shoot for anything. And so we shot high in a lot of cases, we missed in a lot of cases, but, but we get further than we otherwise would if we never shot. - Yeah, that's excellent. And so being a hockey guy, there's a, there's a famous quote, Wayne Gretzky said that, "You, you miss a hundred percent of the shots "you never take." And so I think, you know, that's important the reserve command did make an investment in cyber and we feel like that's really important and, and where you and the team and everybody that had a piece of that is really moved us along in a way. And we're at this point now we've been a Wing for almost two years, and I know you and I spent a lot of time and I appreciate your counsel throughout the years here about what we need to look like in the future. And, and I'm not sure where that's going to go and, you know, you hear it a lot of demand signals. We use that terminology all the time. And so what kind of thoughts do you think future-wise that we should consider? - Yeah, so instruction question, sir, I think that, that number one, I think that we cyber especially reserve cyber, We kinda get a bad rap for, not for folks telling us we, we're not telling our story effectively. And, and to, to, to tell another story I heard a long time ago from the strategic triad, right, so, so subs, missiles, and, and bombers, right, the nuclear triad. Missiles never really had to tell their story, right. Because everybody knows it is strategic to turn and it will always have it right. Cyber for our part in the story we should be telling is that it is also a strategic imperative, right. It's in the NDS and other things. So that's the story we need to continue telling that it is a strategic imperative to have defensive cyberspace operations, offensive cyber space operations, and then those other Expeditionary Comms and other things that enable our horses to fight forward. And so I think that that in terms of a changing or

shifting dynamic is what we need to message better. That is the strategically, strategic imperative that we had, those type of resources then we plan and program effectively. - Yeah, so your, your time with LL and your time, you know, working close to the Cafe write speeches and in the front office, really, I think prepared you to think that way. I'm not sure everybody necessarily has said those same experiences to think that way. And, and, and certainly through my experience of going through a PME at a joint school, it kinda makes you think differently and going forward here, where have you seen, maybe your mind shift change, maybe growing the group from, from that first real small group into where we are today? Have things gone the way you expected or maybe not, and where could have we, what lessons learned are there, is there that we can apply to going on forward in future? - Yeah, so I think I did have a, or was able to write, so I was coming out of squadron command when I came here as a group deputy, right. So I was at comic con squadron commander went to the 911 to do kind of base calm. And it came here as the deputy. And so as the deputy group commander, right, you're an alter of ego for the group commander. And so I was very much focused on a staff level operations in support of subordinate level commander. So that, that was the job. Heading out to the date two, and what would be the 860th, I had a big mind shift because it was about forming a staff. Yes, but it also was about supporting the 670 plus airmen. And so everything we did wasn't necessarily a staff activity, it was focused on an outcome for an airman, right. What package are you pushing, what award are you pushing, but how are you reducing your work, work such that it's impacting an airman and enabling him or her to do their mission, right. And so coming back up here as a, as a, as a, a vice man commander, I think it's going to be a different shift because then I'm going to be looking at your out priorities right. Cause you're looking up and out and then focus the staff and translating that message, so we're able to achieve those kinds of strategic level priorities. And I think that's, that's been the shift. It's, it's been very staff then down in the Wings, focused on the airman tactically, and then now we're going up and out. - Yes, and again, I think that as soon as you, well, to be prepared for, you know, being that vice commanders, having those different experiences as well. So we look at the vision for the future. You know, we've talked about a lot of things back and forth about really where we need to go. And, and how, how do you think we should approach that from just sorting through all the different demand signals from all of our mission partners. Any thoughts there? - Carefully. I mean, I think it's, it's, it's the, I guess the best word to describe it, because I think that there, and we talked about demand signals, but I think that, that we're in this, this position because cyber is a strategic imperative. Everybody wants us to be everywhere doing everything. But we're in also in that, that, that, that time in, in the Air Force, when Reese's resources aren't necessarily there such that can afford us the opportunity to be everywhere. You and I know when everybody listening knows that the reservist are innovators. And so what we really have to do is kinda take a look at what our airmen are capable of doing. Where, where does the capacity lie? What can we train to recruit to and kind of get to shift our focus and support those missions that we're best aligned to do right away, and then grow in other areas where we know we can get to with mark success very, very quickly because that's the speed of need. - Yeah, or and I know we talked

a lot about our requirements system, RFC being very deliberate and there's good reasons for that. And in the cyber community, obviously, you know, are, are our demands on us are much faster. We need to be more agile adaptive, and we got to kind of balance that and make sure that we are being strategic in nature cause we're strategic depth and that we're not overextending ourselves, that we're getting compelling and relevant missions so that we can recruit, retain to and build on to be good mission partners, you know, across the board. And so I struggle with that because I want to move much faster because you know, down here at the Wing, you see the kind of the constant grind and the Reg AF doing, and you want to, I feel there's overall need to help them and support and be there and be part of it. I got a little bit of a FOMO, fear of missing out, right. I don't want to miss an opportunity. I want to put the airmen in good spots and opportunities for them to be successful and grow and use their skills, and I'm proud of everything we do. So we're going to have to try to navigate that together, right. We're gonna have to kinda lean on each other, and, and, and I hope you can pull me back at times when it's like, hey, it's probably something we need to think about more or slow down, or need you to put your hand on my shoulder and push me forward at times to do that, and we'll try to, you know, play off each other and, and make sure that we're doing right by the airmen in the Wing and doing that. - That's sort of shorted of the simple assault will put my hands on you. I got your back. And we'll say that, that I, I mean, I think that that's the, that's the challenge and the risk, right. So, so we're right now talking about things we want to do in 2023, which, which in our world is years away. And in some people, I mean, they would say that that's too far away to even consider, but we're having to make those planning choices conversations now. And so I'm a copy on, on, on the FOMO. I think we're, we're all a fall victim to it at some point, but as you said, no, we gotta be arctic, I mean, deliver. - Yeah so let's shift gears a little bit. So personally with you, can you talk about any mentors you've had or you know, leadership lessons that, that people have kinda changed your mind or had a real big impact in your life? Not necessarily who they are, but what that kind of meant to you? - I will talk about probably my first mentor that is I share his name, Silas Mondale, Darden junior of a retired army command sergeant major. And, and there are a number of nuggets he shared with me over the years. I call them nuggets 'cause oftentimes I was the kid about receiving so what's it that it was going to be. I tell a story about, I was, I think I had just wax, so, so one of my high school jobs was I worked at carwash. So I think I had, I had, I had at wax the truck, I was going to be driving it that evening. I think it was 16, 17 year old at wax. His, his, his truck could only be taken it out. And I think not, not I think, so a wax at truck and he was in the house or he was just getting home, and I was like, "Hey dad, look, look at the job "I did on the truck." And, and he looked at me and he said, "Well you gonna be driving it aren't you?" And I was like, "Yeah, I don't know what that means." And he said, "Why would I thank you "for something you're supposed to be doing?" And, and, and don't get me wrong, I certainly appreciate that, the gratitude's important and we have to thank people is early and often as possible, especially in, in the military reserves context, because it truly is a thankless job sometimes. And we're taking a lot of time away from a lot of people that could be doing a lot of other things. But the, the lesson in that, that very early lesson in my life was that, you know, the kind

of reward for doing your job is no punishment. And then if you were approaching the mission and the job that way, you're usually a fair better. Again, he's, he's provided a number of other, other life, life lessons, some private, some, nothing, but that was a very early one, knowing that it's kind of guided me in my military career.

- Yeah, that's excellent. So I also share my father's name as well and have, you know, some similar experiences as well around work ethic and, and, and I remember one summer, I had a couple of days off and I worked at the airport and so pumping gas in airplanes and pulling airplanes around. And of course, dad helped me get that job 'cause his buddy ran the FBO and, and so I had a couple of days off for whatever reason and no baseball. And he's like, "What are you gonna do?" I'm like, "Well, I'm just gonna relax, "hang out with my friends." He's like, "No, we're going to the farm." To his dad's farm, my grandpa's farm and his middle of summer, and we're going to go bale hay. And so I spent two days and, you know, 14 hours a day, 90 degree baling hay. And I thought, man, this sucks. This is hard work. And, but it taught me like never take a day off. Like you always got to work and there's always something to do. And I've kind of tried to live that since then and, and, and embody that man. I've seen him to him his whole life. So I also was a little bit, you know, I wasn't happy about it and at the time, and but now I look back and I have, you know, I got my own kids trying to help them understand those things and I know you're new dad too, and so you're a different, different spot in that continuum of growth of the kids. And I'm at that point now where the teenagers, they don't listen to me so- - Well, my 15-month-old doesn't listen to me. I mean, we have a meeting of the minds all the time as to what I think, "Hey, here's what you should be doing." And I think he agrees, but all of a sudden he doesn't and just goes off its own little world. So that's certainly a teenagers, 15 months old, same thing. - Same thing, yeah. That's a and see again, this perspective, like I forgot what it was like then. I mean, you show me, you face time with them yesterday and I'm like, "Oh man, it'd be so awesome "to have them that age again and so much fun." And, yeah, similar challenges, no matter where they are, making a team of life. And so I know you've recently made a move kind of back to DC, how's that going? - Going well, so I headed back for those of you don't know, I'm off of an AGR status back into the judicial reserve world. And so I went back to my civilian job at the department of justice. And so headed back there, enjoying, you know, being back there for the, for the past a few weeks and really enjoy being back into the thick of a civilian life. - Certainly much different than life in Warner Robins, am sure. - Definitely the pace, although, you know, the challenges with, with COVID-19 or, or I think experiences worldwide that definitely in US and so with the social distancing and everything else that that pace is about the same. - Sure. So we're going to kind of, kinda continue to figure out what that means for us as Wing and, and this, I think, again, we've talked about a lot. This is a long, this is the marathon we're in the long fight here against this thing, and making sure that, you know, we're being smart and commanders are, are making good decisions to keeping other people safe, and so would you come out of the group command? Is there anything you wanna, that you learned as a group commander that you'd like to share with maybe squadron commanders or unit leadership or anybody about, as you kinda reflect on your time there about, really making them more effective, either as individuals or unit? - Yeah, so I think that, the 860th commander superintendents an

airman know this, but one of my bumper stickers is noted by our problems. Right, and so, because we, and I think this is, this is military context outside of military context, there is a, a, you know, you see a problem and you wanna figure out, you wanna do something about it, so there's kind of this OODA loop of what you should do. Meanwhile, the problem is still happening and, or going on, right. And so I try to tell folks that you see it and address it immediately, right. And even if you don't know what to do, ask somebody about it, and so let's tackle it as a team together. So, so don't admire problems. Number two, take advantage of time and don't abuse it, right. And so, we have, you know, 1200 people in this Wing, 1200 people plus in this Wing and they're all giving up time to do this work, right, the work of, of, of this nation's defense, when they could be doing something else, probably making a lot more money doing it. And we have to, - For sure. - We have to acknowledge that for, you know, base level, traditional reserves is giving up time to come support our mission on a UTA when they could be in Grandison spending home time home with, with family, a 15-month-old in my case, or if they, you know, don't have any friends they could be sitting in a parking lot in the burrito, watching a movie on YouTube. Still valuable time that they could be doing. And so we have to both acknowledge that and make sure that that every minute they spend with us is a value to them personally, professionally. And so that would be my big number two is both acknowledge that there is a time factor and, and don't abuse it. - Yeah, I think sometimes we lose sight of that, right. And so we kind of get into that grind of a GTA or whatever. And we really got to think about America is truly a great place, and there's lots of opportunities for people to do different things. And for somebody who raises their hand and says, "Hey, this is what I wanna do," we should really be focused on making sure that time is valuable, to them and it's taken care of airmen. And then I think we get back much more than what we give as long as we give enough for that person. And I really like the first one you talked about, doing admire a problem. Previously, you know, I've heard a lot about, don't walk by a problem, right. Kinda same thing, but don't admire it, I think takes it to a next level. Like, like you're going to, you see a problem, you may see it, you may not see it, but you walk by it. But if you're admire, it means you're going to take that next step and really think about, make a decision. Like, no, I need to do something about it. And I think that's good mentality for all of us to take with us in any part of our lives. - And I think that related to number two, I mean, you just provoked another thought, which is a kinda number three is, there's people that have kind of reached that point where professionally and personally, they need to move on, right. And so I think that we have a number of folks here that have been doing this work a long time. We got to start thinking about other positions where they, and these aren't bad conversations where they can be successful. Because you know, folks want to, wanna serve, and we have to find 'em opportunities where they can serve better, that means opportunities within the Wing and outside it. And so that's kinda taking advantage of time. We also got to have those developmental conversations early and often about, "Hey, what's the best, "best place for you where you are," having that feeling where you're you on and inclined to, to, to being successful. - Yeah, I think the Wings had point too where before, I think we're trying to like keep a lot of people in the Wing will help build this, then it kinda have that institutional knowledge. I kinda feel

like at the point, like, "Hey, we want to graduate people right, out of the Wing. We want them to go out and do different things, talk about the Wing. And then if they get an opportunity to come back in a different role, certainly want, we want them to have those opportunities, but we want, we want gladiators everywhere. And I know you've been really good at deliberately, targeting mentoring people for certain positions that are going to be able to have influence to help us and provide them personal growth. So I really appreciate that about you. Really happy to have you here as part of the team. Certainly you'll hear more from us coming through podcasts and all of all our social media channels. And I want to thank everybody for listening. And if you, if you really would like to have a two hour get out of jail free, we're gonna do the keyword again. And so the keyword is going to be emailed to the public affairs, just a email or a box. And it's going to be, Silas is the keyword. So email the word Silas, over to Sam at the public affairs. And then we'll randomly select somebody to get to, to have a two hour pass off UTA or supervisor pending obviously to make sure that happens. So thanks for listening, and I'm going to let Col. Darden give us kinda last word, if you had anything else to share and wrap it up. - Well, a couple of caveats to that spelling of the word, Silas, because if you, if you can't figure out how to spell it, 'cause I think you should be able to spell it right. But I'll give you a couple of hints, right. So there's a book called "Silas Marner." There's a Silas the Snail of, of old PBS, a kid's show called "Pinwheel" and Silas was also a character in "The Da Vinci Code" - All right. It's a little homework required and we will make the caveat that you have to spell it right in order to be the winner. - But as a, as a final shot, I just want to thank, thank Colonel Erredge for taking the time. I'm glad to be here. And I look forward to engaging each one of you listeners. - Excellent, thanks everybody. (Upbeat music)