

Ep. 40: Introducing the 426th Network Warfare Squadron

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Welcome to another episode of Sword and Shield. This is Chief Master Sergeant Howard, 960th COG superintendent, and today with me I have... - Lt. Col. Gronning, Maria L., 426th NWS commander. - And... - This Chief Master Sergeant Youkey, with the 426th NWS. - And... - Lt. Col. Greg Black, 426th NWS. - Awesome, awesome. I'm so excited to talk to you guys today. So, I have a few questions about what do you guys do, and I'm kind of hoping you can help all our listeners learn a little bit about the 426th Network Warfare Squadron. You guys do some awesome things. So I'll just jump right into it. What AFACs do you guys have in your unit? - We have 17 Delta, 17 zeros, one Bravo fours, and three Delta zeros, and three Delta ones. - Awesome. So number of AFAC is really cyber centric and a little bit of calm as well. And then some Intel mixed in there as well. - Ooh, forgive me. Yes, we have Intel. We have our one in, and our 14 in as well. - I was wondering if you guys could kind of share from your guys' perspective, what do you do as a unit in layman's terms? - We do cyber defense as a standard fare. That is one of our biggest mandates as far as the Air Force and Air Force reserve is concerned in terms of cyber mission support. So we are here to defend the Avnet, as a day-to-day operational requirement. The chief can go down the nugget points of how we do it specifically, operate AFC, but that's essentially what we do as a mission set. - Awesome, chief. - So with that it's a very closely related to cyber security, is how the outside civilian world would label it and classify it. We operate in blue space mostly where we're hanging out on the Avnet and making sure that there's no bad guys in our networks and things like that. And then we have the whole gambit of support to accomplish that. So we've got our 3D's and a wide smattering of them who actually maintain and help develop the system where it needs to be developed and manage accounts and things like that. And then we've got our operators, our 1Bs and our 17Ss who actually go out and do the cyber security portion of it. And our Intel folks who go do the Intel collection, and they kind of help guide and direct the mission sets that we do as far as where we're looking specifically and what we're looking for. - So like on the operation side you have the 1B force in the one ends and that's also your 17 zeros and Delta. So that's very operations focused. So, anything you can kind of give us to what that workload looks like. I mean, without getting so specifics sort of classification? - Absolutely. So on a regular basis, every single day there's alerts being fired, the alerts are generated by signatures that are written. We have folks in the squatter who write signatures which is just a fancy way of saying, "Hey, if this type of activity, or if this

type of traffic "is going on the network, it fires an alert." And our operators will get out there, and every time when they come on shift, they get on, and we look at the different alerts that are out there and they'll grab one of those and they'll start investigating it. And as it develops, if it turns into something more than we get other specialties involved in really figuring out exactly what it is to respond to and to isolated, to deal with it, and then to turn around and also learn from it and say, "Okay, well, this is what we saw in the network "so let's improve our signatures for next time. "Let's work on making it so that that has even "less of a chance of getting in." But if it's not firing just a signature, we have folks who actually go out and do specified searches based on the different behavior network, traffic behavior, the different ones and zeros that are going across the lines and saying, "Hey, this does not normally fit in that "in the realm of what we see, "so let's take it and dissect it, "and look and see what it might be." - And some part of that too, and from a mechanic standpoint, from a system standpoint, that's our day to day operations. So a lot of that can also be driven by the Intel folks that special inputs that come in through the intelligence pipeline can drive a lot of the information or the direction by which we search and look, and review the information as well. So when they plug in the intelligence, it gives us a really good look to vector us to where we need to investigate certain things or at least review certain things. And if it comes out to something of an investigation and that just magically appears in that process. So there's a huge driving element from our Intel folks that I want to kinda highlight there, because it seems to be disappearing in the communication. They're a forgotten entity and I don't want them to be forgotten entity in this process, they're very much a huge driving element to that, and are very, very important part of what we do as a domain. - And I like to make correlations, being that are non-cyber specific. So if I'm a non-cyber individual, tell me if this seems wrong, it's almost like you guys are similar to security forces. You have a perimeter that you're monitoring. You have system out there, and then when you see a perimeter breach, then you send out a team to go look at that breach, and then to pick up some information, that's where Intel comes into play. And then they determine whether they need to start doing a base search or they need to start looking at facilities based on those alerts and get after it, to take it from a cyber perspective to a physical perspective. - Sure, that's fair. - I would say that that's really close. One other things to add to that is, yes, whenever they're going out and looking at the breach and involving Intel in looking at that, but we also have the front end with Intel who says, "Hey, by the way, these sort of activities "have been seen other places or in these areas, "so go look specifically at this stretch of your friends." - All in the dark? - Yeah. - Yeah. - So it's very much that, it's just the very digital version of that. So it's which makes the fence line infinitely long. - I was just going to ask that question. So when you start thinking about, not just the physical piece. So with the difference between a physical base. When we look at JBSA or even just Chapman Annex, where we're at today, we know what that perimeter looks like, but when it comes to cyber, that perimeter is totally different. - We don't have geographic limitations as far as perimeters are concerned, we have areas of responsibility where we focus our, this organization focuses, or this mission set focuses on the Avnet. And so that's our enclave, that's our AOR that we work within. But that doesn't mean that the impact of the work that we do stays

within that as well. We have joint implications, we have inter-agency implications, we have national, and even in some cases beyond domestic and international implications as well. So we have partnerships around the world, we look at 385 global sites. And so we're not limited just because we say we work within the Avnet, doesn't necessarily mean we're US-based, Texas-based, San Antonio based, that's not necessarily the case. The impact is potentially global depending on the circumstances. Air go, Intel being such a great opportunity to give us tips and information source from all kinds of places around the world on a cyber threat that is going to impact the Avnet. So it's a very interesting, very large impact and information gathering platform and environment that we work with them. - And I would add to that too is that we have been pulled in before with multiple three letter agencies or other departments working their mission sets as well, and working with them. So we do have, we do stretch outside of the normal just Department of the Air Force, and we'll start doing DoD-wide or we'll start even department of state or whoever it might be in the different three letter agencies that are out there and working real life actionable items that are out and about of the bad guy trying to us, and not always just us in the Air Force that the bad guy is targeting, but it's a joint effort a lot of times, which keeps it pretty fun and exciting too. - Gotcha. And then, Col. Black, you're in charge of the maintenance side of the house, correct? What does that look like? - So for the maintenance side, we provide the support to the operators, to the mission itself. I mean, we provide administrative password reset. I mean, anything administrative like that is one section. The next section that we look at is making sure the equipment, the weapons system is working and functioning properly. We also try we make sure that the system itself is updated, you know what they need updates, software, firmware updates to that. So we provide the maintenance support to operations. - Validate the infrastructure ready to go so that operators can get out there and do their job. - Yes, sir. - Awesome, that's great stuff. So I was wondering if you guys can help me understand what does a day in the life of 426th member look like? - It's different at every level, but I would defer to chief on the... - Sort of general operate. So if we're looking at... I'm a TR coming in on UTA, going through the normal cycle, we do the sign and we do the brief, but what is my job look like at the 426? - So on the operator side, when they show up, it's a lot of an ask on an operator, because they do have to get on to the weapon system, they do have to operate, they do have to maintain currency. And the way we do that is with real-world operations. So when they show up for the UTA, they're going to be working on the live weapons system, they're going to be working live alerts. They're going to be hitting training marks and having people help them get to different training goals and milestones. But at the same time, it is really revolving around get on the weapon system and operate it. - So they are in the AOR at that point, they are in the environment? - They are absolutely butting heads with the bad guys. So they're getting their ones and zeros, and they're shaping them into their knife and they're taking stabs at the bad. - So they're stabbing people in the face through cyberspace- - That's right, hurrah! - That's right. - Not that I was setting you up for that or anything, but absolutely, stabbing them in the face through cyber space. - That's right. - Awesome. And for a maintainer, what does that look like, sir? - So we come in, our day starts before they even show up. Because we gotta

make sure the weapons systems is up and ready to going. But when the operators do come in, every now and then we have those folks, we try to make sure that their accounts and all good are set up and ready to go. But every now and then we get those individuals or people that either locked themselves out. But, we take that and resolve those issues. And then, for example, if they have issues with particular parts of the weapon system, they also bring that to us and we work through those, troubleshooting, making sure that we are there and able to support the mission and find the bad guy. - Awesome. - So I mean, to me, I think I can kind of grasp this but I want to hear from you, what makes your unit great? - People, - 100% - absolutely the people - 100%. - It's definitely a challenging thing, and cyberspace is always moving and it's always advancing and it's always very extremely dynamic, and it takes quite a bit to keep up with it. And the people that come in, the amount of drive and dedication that they have, it's just astounding. And it's not just, "Hey, I'm gonna be smart "with the ones and zeros, "I'm gonna be smart with the infrastructure, "I'm gonna be smart with the Intel." It's none of that, it's not just that, it's all of that, but then they also come into the building in the 426, and it's a point of pride of being a member of the 426th is that it's a family environment of the, I am absolutely 100% invested in the people sitting to the left or right of me, and that's the attitude that the people show up to the unit with too. And it's really impressive because they show up and you say, "What can I do for you and to help you "with what you're trying to accomplish "with your career? "What can I do to help you with accomplishing "what you're trying to accomplish with this mission set?" Very, very close knit organization when it comes to that. And I think that's what really sets it apart. - The unit members have given us feedback in the way that we have led the organization in the last two or three years of being here. And it's been a privilege to actually be a part of their feedback and the comments that they make, because honestly, if it wasn't for the fact that they understood why they were here, they understood why they were coming into the organization every weekend, they understood what they were meant to do other than the job that they're supposed to do. The Airmanship, the Wingmanship, the leadership, the followership aspect of the organization has been solidified, I think quite nicely, had been formed and solidified quite nicely to the degree that they really have bought into what we're doing and why we're doing it, which is a big, big deal. Organizational culture is so incredibly important to chief, myself and Black, all the leadership team members we all understand what it's all about. And our members collectively holistically understand that as well. Which I think is kind of a rarity, as far as a whole organization, as large as we are the 150 give or take with only a small window of hiring to be done yet to get to 100%. But for the vast majority, if not the whole unit, they really truly appreciate where we're coming from and where we're trying to take the organization, which is a nice thing for us on a leadership scale to know that we have people who have bought to the culture and to the idea of what we're doing. And that's what we intend to carry it forward as a legacy of the 426. I mean, just as a measurement of that in the last, what? Three years? Well, this unit has won the McClellan Award, which is one of the highly competitive cyber awards. There's not a whole lot of awards out there at the Air Force reserve and the Air Force level that we can compete in with the flying units and with the Combat Comm Units, and the

folks that deploy consistently. We don't have that kind of fighting muscle as far as recognition is concerned from a tangibility standpoint. And for us to win the McClellan three years in a row at the Air Force reserve command level, is huge, number one. Number two, to win it at the Air Force level in 2019, is another incredible feat and milestone by one little unit that could. So I'm extremely proud of the leadership team of this unit, I'm extremely proud of the unit itself and the unit membership and all the work that everybody does, and how they do it, and at the level that they do it. That they deserve every recognition there is. So, this unit absolutely is a great place to be, it's a great home for anybody who wants to own their skills and be a part of a great organization and a great leadership team. And, absolutely this it's a great place to be at the end of the day. - And, so after the people it's really the mission site. It's absolutely crazy to me how many different places that the 426 touches, cause most people are like, "Hey, it's cyber security, or it's network warfare "or cyber defense." And you think the computer that I'm sitting at my desk. What people forget about is the aircraft that is a glass cockpit that has computer going on it. Guess what, we touch that too. The little iPads or the electronic tiers that the maintainer has out on the flight line, that's something that we're engaged with as well. It spans the whole gambit, the upload that's going on over the COCOM someplace that's getting passed from one COCOM commander to another or whatever it might be, that's something that we're protecting as well, and we're engaged in as well. So it can range quite a bit from day to day of where we're actually touching, but it is a worldwide thing and it's in everywhere you look there's some aspect of cyber going on. And that's just absolutely bothers my mind of how much spider web goes on in the cyber verse around the entire globe. - And that's a great segue of Chief. Joint exercises is another one that we have become quite I wouldn't say famous, but our folks really excel in joint exercises, whether they're at Fort Meade Maryland for cyber command itself, or if it's done at packup, paycom for those types of exercises out there. Various arrow AORs, we are absolutely supporting exercises. And like I said, we somehow come out on top with recognitions for our folks consistently. And that just kind of speaks to the talent that we have in the organization, in the vested interest that people have to actually support the various missions, not just to ACD weapon system on its own. So, the talent pool is incredible, and I don't think that's a credit to us as fostering their talent, they come in with the talent. They come in with the talent, we protect the talent from a leadership standpoint. We make sure that they have every single roadblock taken away from them, so that they have every opportunity to just get forward, and just get it done. And there's such a huge opportunity for us because we do capitalize on the importance of that talent. And so it's a neat experience to work with such incredible individuals. - Awesome. I guess kind of a final question I have for you guys today is what do you do to develop your team? - Go, chief. (Laughs) - So, so- - He's got 80% of the unit, that's the most important thing to know about this, is that this Col. Superintendent has 80% of the unit, because 80% of the unit is university force. That is the meat and potatoes and the backbone of any organization, but especially in operational organization. Now, that's not to say anything. I'm not knocking off my officers because they're pretty top-notch themselves. However, Colonel, I want to give credit to the 80% large of the

organization first, and then I'll talk to the leadership aspect of it thereafter, so, Chief over to you, sir. - So for the development of the team, it's a daily go about, whereas there's an expectation not just, if every member's coming in and they're looking out for one another and they're being a good wing man, that's fantastic, but how do you take them to the next level? How do you progress their career with their technical skillset, with air force skillset? Moving them off a keyboard to management type of roles, those sorts of things. But developing the airman, developing them on that professional technical level, and then on the professional Air Force airman level, that's a daily demand signal, and that is something that we really put a lot of emphasis on, which is, hey, by the way, like you heard with Col. Black saying the maintenance team comes in, and they've got to come in early, and they actually are looking at start the day before the UTA starts at a minimum. And usually you got a couple of AGRs, at least we were looking at it a week out and making sure everything's set. And the Apps folks coming in early because they've got to get their mission brief, they've got to get out on the floor and get on the actual weapons system and in the AOR. But there's still that daily demand signal from them of saying, "Hey, by the way, "this is the expectation, you are doing all this work, "and we're also going to expect this on top of it." And this that's on top of it is supervisors being supervisors, the superintendents being super... And learn and leading and developing that next level and that next layer of folks, and making sure that, hey, our tech sergeants are being developed to be master sergeants, not just in the 426, but to be the most competitive ones anywhere that they go in the rest of their career. And that's our return for the level of effort that they give us, is that we will develop them. We will send them to whatever schools we possibly can, we will help them get set up for whatever certifications that they're trying to, all of these different things. Its not a one-way relationship that we have with the unit, it's a two-way relationship, there's the give and take, yes, you're going to perform. And the unit obviously performs like that, that's where we get our reputation from, that's where we get the awards and accolades from. But the return is, "Hey, by the way, "whenever you step anywhere else, "you are going to be the most competitive one, "you are going to be prepared, "you are going to be ready for whatever life brings you." And one of the conversations I've been having recently too is it's not the way that we see success, it's how the individual sees the success in their life. What is it that means that they're being successful to them, then how do we get them there? - Gotcha. - And it's not just, I'm not just going to build you to be what I need in the unit or whatever that, I'm going to build you to where you want to go with your career with your life. - And the same thing applies to the officers. I mean, the officers obviously have a different mandate at their levels. And we have the preponderance of officers at the major level right now on the field grade side. We're growing the Lieutenant bucket quite significantly, and that's a good thing for us. And as we recruit and recruiting services helps us out with that. There is a great coordination with recruiting services to make sure that not only do these officers have the qualifications but that they fit within the organization. That's a huge deal for us is to have the right people fit. You can train anybody anything operationally, but if they're not a good fit to the organization, we have to do a better job of making sure that we find the right candidates that fit. So that's one of the big things on that front, but in

terms of developing our officers, my biggest priority is to make sure that, like the chief said, I understand what it is that they want out of life. - Okay. - Just because I see an officer as a commander and gallivanting the rest of the planet in the Air Force to serve, doesn't necessarily mean that that officer wants to do that. But that doesn't mean I cut it down either and go, "Oh, well, then that means they're just "not gonna do anything, they're just gonna sit somewhere." That's not the case. They have exceptional potential in the position where they are. There might be a locality thing where they want to stay local to a certain place for family reasons. I can still support that as a commander, I don't need to stunt their career just because. So those opportunities are great, but they're, like the chief said, there is a two-way communication, it's a two way street. And we strive to make sure that both sides of that communication is heard and supported and executed for, to the benefit of the member. Because a happy member is a happy organization, because the mission is supported. And that makes life a lot easier for the leadership team to make sure that we don't have drama, we're trying to keep the drama to a minimum. - Awesome. Sounds like a really great unit. - It is. - I know that from my perspective, you guys are doing a lot of great work. Have great airmen across the board and all those AFCs, and that I can personally attest to individuals progressing in their capabilities as well as moving on to bigger and better things out of your unit on a regular basis for having that growth opportunity because they were those best candidates in those situations. So- - Didn't you start off- - I was going to say you are a great example of that chief, aren't you? - No. (all laughing) Definitely, I don't toot my own horn, but- - We'll toot it for you. - Awesome, I appreciate it. But no, I really thank you, Col. Gronning, Chief Youkey, Col. Black, for kind of giving us an insight to the 426 family, what the mission is, what you guys do to develop your airmen. Are there any parting comments that you want to make about your unit, mam? - This is going to be heard outside of just this unit and the Air Force, and it's going to be public forum. I just want to continue to tout that the pride that I have in this organization, and every single member of this unit, because if it wasn't for those members doing what they do on a daily basis, what you all do on a daily basis, I think my job would be tremendously more complex and complicated, so I'm eternally grateful for that. So that's my parting gift for this, or my parting comment for this podcast. Thanks for the opportunity to speak to ya'll. - Thank you. Chief, any parting shots? - So, the 426 rocks. And I would challenge you to look anywhere to cross the wing to say where there isn't a fingerprint that comes that doesn't have some 426 tinge on it someplace. Because it's not just that we're doing the cyber defense mission, it's that we're also reaching out and involved with the group, involved with the wing, involved with the other units across the wing. There is 426th flavor on just about everything that's going on. So and it's really humbling to be a part of a team that can do that, and to be a part of it. - Awesome. Well, on behalf of the leadership, thank you for being the leaders that you are, thank your Airmen for all the efforts that they make, the great, wonderful work that they do. And I can't speak enough or highly enough of all individuals in your unit. So, thank you. - Thank you. - To our cyber Airmen out there, I hope you have a great day. (Upbeat music)