

Ep. 42: Career pathways and leadership destinations

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(Light music) - Welcome to another episode of the "Sword and Shield." I am Chief Chris Howard, 960th COG Superintendent and today with me, I have... - Captain Jamillah Gonzalez, 960th Cyber Wing Executive Officer. - Good morning, ma'am, how you doing? - I'm doing well, thank you. - Awesome. I appreciate you sitting down and talking with us today. The challenge today is kinda talking about how we both got into the positions we're currently in and what choices we made and what pathway we took. So, I was wondering if you kind of could share with me, how did you start off in the military? - Yeah, definitely. I started off 18 years old, about six months after graduating from high school, living in the Bay Area of California and introduced to the military through a family member of mine. An uncle of mine had been in the Air Force and I actually think he was in communications 'cause he talked about working on satellites. - Satellite dishes? - Yes. - Okay. - And so, just a little bit of a discussion and just kinda said, "Maybe the Air Force is something you'd like to do." So, I had initially gone to look at the Coast Guard and even the Coast Guard recruiter actually told my mom, "Hey, if she was my daughter, I would have her go into the Air Force." And so, even though I had kind of gone one route, I also had a family member kind of say, "Hey, maybe you wanna try Air Force." And so, that was kind of how I got introduced to it. I went into the delayed enlistment program and knew that, before I graduated high school that that was the route I was going to take. So, that was kinda how I came in and some of the background that kind of brought me into it. - What was your first AFSC then? Or your job? - So my first AFSC, I think now it's called Survival Equipment, but at the time it was Air Crew Life Support. And so I had come in, I think it's called the open general. So, it was just rolling the dice and see what was going to happen. So, that was I think a recruiter tactic, I don't know, but I wasn't sure what was going to happen. I think I found out, I think the day when you go to MEPS I think is when they say, "Hey, this is what's available." And then later on you kinda get the AFSC. I don't remember if it was boot camp. It was almost, September will be 20 years, since I joined. So, I joined September 5th, 2001. - Okay, wow. - So, just to kinda, simmering on that- - So, were you in basic during 9/11? - I was in basic during 9/11. - Oh, wow. - And I remember when I joined the Air Force, I said, "Mom, you have nothing to worry about. No one is gonna mess with the United States of America." I remember just thinking, you know, I'm good. - Just a few days later. - And just a few days later it was the whole lockdown in boot camp and I will tell you my first thought was, this can't be real. This is testing what are we going to do when we're told that our nation is under attack? That was like my initial thought, I don't know why. I don't know if other people thought that

way, but it was, hey, this is a no kidding, how are you gonna react? So, it took me a little bit to believe it and they put the whole screens up and really said, "Hey, those that have family members, you could call your family." 'Cause there was members that did have family members in the twin towers, you know? So, that was my initial, I would say first week of Air Force experience. - Wow, and from basic you went on to tech school and then what was your first duty station like? - My first duty station was Milton Hall, England. So, it was dorms that first, I think year and a half or so. So, just a pat on the back from mom say, "Hey, everything's gonna be okay. You're going to love it overseas. It's gonna be great." But it had been since, you know, 9/11 had happened earlier. So, it was kind of the lockdown type of thing, very strict on who was coming on base. So, I would hear the stories of, "Hey, the base used to be open and everyone used to come and go to the club." And now, you know, it was kind of if you don't have an ID card you're not welcome. - Right, yeah much different, especially overseas after 9/11. That's for sure. So, how many years did you do REGAF? - So, I did the full four years of REGAF and I did all of them overseas. And then I came back stateside and transitioned into the reserve. So kind of thinking about how I got here was just kind of the active duty and I did the joint spouse and I had a young child by the time I was done with my four years and it was kind of the, hey, what do I wanna see as a future for how you're gonna raise children and how you're gonna be in a relationship. So that's kind of, you know, when we think about how we got here and the decisions that we make and how they go, hey, REGAF or reserve? And I've been TR and civilian, it just kind of, it does, as we try to stay as professional in all the things that we discuss, there's always that personal part that kind of drives different decisions. - Right. - Along the way. - No, definitely. Right, so I mean, I came in in the mid to late 90s, well before 9/11, right? And at the time, everybody was like, "I'm just joining for college." I knew a while back that I was going to go in the military. Originally I was planning on joining the Marine Corps actually. And I had gone to the Marine recruiter at one of these fairs, I'm like, "I wanna be a Devil Dog. I wanna be a Marine." And I gave him my number and said, you know, "I really, really wanna be a Marine." Didn't call me, first time I got stood up. But took the ASVAB, everything, and this was like my junior year of high school. I get a phone call from the Air Force recruiter, Al Daniels. I still remember him, good friend of mine. He's like, "Hey, Chris, got your scores here. Give you any job you want. Really?" So, I ran right down there, right? And I signed up that day and I had to get parent approval because I was under age. And so I got my mom to sign pretty quick and then I called my dad. My dad's like, "Are you sure?" He's like, "All right." That was the conversation. My parents are like, "Here, you got a plan, go for it." And I was in delayed entry for a little over a year. And, of course, they had to change some dates to align 'cause you can only be in the DEP program for a year, actually helped out my recruiter a number of times was a DEP commander for a little bit. And then right after high school, jump right into basic training. I was in basic training when the bomb went off for the Atlanta Olympics. So, you know, get a little bit of that. Didn't even know about it. It was one of those interesting items. Then tech school and then on to my first duty station at Ramstein. And I was at Ramstein for my first tour. They had an In Place COT for my second tour. And that's when 9/11 happened. I actually had orders to go to PSAB. I was supposed to fly out that

day and deploy. And we changed a lot of things up, actually trying to get on base. I was in the location; I was in our bunker at my first duty station. So, my first day of FSC, or actually, my only FSC really was a 2E1, which was at the time satellite communications. And I worked actually radio relay throughout Europe work. And we had a secured building that we were in working. We were briefing a, I think it was a two-star general, when things were starting to go down and we were watching the news and we actually someone said, "Hey, hey, something hit one of the towers." And we turned on the Fox News and then we were actually standing there with the general one second at secondhand. He's like, "Okay, this is not good." And then we're watching it as things unfold when the Pentagon hit, they just kinda went. You know, bat crazy. Right? So, we locked down the facility, we locked down the base, everybody got hunkered down. We started running through all of our checklists, going through threat cons at the time. Back then, right? And walked through that. But it was a crazy, crazy time. Got picked up for a special duty out of there shortly after that. And then I moved on to flying as a special duty with my career field, which was pretty neat. Got to do a lot of crazy things post 9/11. We did a lot of different types of missions. And then picked up another job going into space systems and then just kind of really fell in behind the green door for awhile without one. And then after about six years total of being gone 190 days plus, I had to make the decision. So, there was a time I had a wife and kids and I was going to lose them. So, I had to make the change and make that adjustment to go into the reserves. - Yeah, so one of the things that you mentioned that got me thinking is just about education and how sometimes it kind of drives some of those decisions. I've definitely met and understood one of the benefits of education. So, one of the things that I did do when I was overseas and kinda got me to getting my degree was, hey, school was important coming up. It was one of the primary things that my mom always emphasized to me and so when I was in Milton High, did my school. I was on the ten-year plan to a bachelor's and I think it ended up being like a five-year plan eventually to a masters, but it was definitely living life, doing those transitions, active duty to reserve, TR, ART, straight civilian, but always looking at the education. What was the next step? What things did I have to manage and balance in my life? A kid, a family, a career, an education. And so, you just kinda got me thinking to, well, how did I get where I am? Well, one of the steps was, even though I was the 10-year plan to the bachelors, when I got it, when the opportunity presented itself to consider, you know, do I do the AFOQT? Do I start again? And I was on a path where I was full-time employed as an Air Reserve technician and just kind of those decisions of what sacrifices am I gonna have to make in my career to maybe pursue another option? - Well, I was kinda hoping you could walk us through. So, you came off a REGAF, you decide to go in the Reserves, what was that first Reserve assignment like? - Yeah, so I came out and I met with a recruiter. I went first, a short time IRR. Just trying to think sometimes when you have a new family and what is that going to look like? So, went into the recruiter and cross trained into education and training and got a unit out in Marino Valley and was living in Las Vegas and they used to do a rotator that would take you out there. So, I started off as education and training and was in a maintenance squadron and had a wonderful supervisor. I think it was a really good turning point to where I had had different types of supervision

when I was active duty and was looking for that mentorship and support as you navigate the new career choices. And so, went into education and training and did that and then eventually ended up in Colorado Springs and cross-trained again into personnel, just kind of fit it. I was working within the FSS doing education and training and they had a need for personnel. And they said, "Hey, you have a really transferable skill. We see that your job ended up, you're in here, trying to get all these things situated with the training records," which was at the time when they were transitioning from the paper copies to the electronic. So, just kind of having those individuals give you the opportunities to see what what's your next step can be, where the needs are. And then just kind of fallen in with that, just saying, hey, if it's gonna take me cross training, then let's do it. - So, you cross-trained and then, we'll let you go ahead and off ramp your enlisted career and go down that officer track. - I think at the time I was a career advisor. So, I had gone into career advising. I was advising people all day long on, "Hey, the Reserve is great. Your opportunities are great. These are all the benefits that you have. This is maybe a good decision you wanna make in your life to keep pursuing something more, staying in the military." And so, I think it just led me to the environment was like, well, you're supposed to be looking at your goals and what you can do and what you can achieve. And so, I was at about that 12-year point and so had, yeah, I think I was right about 12 years. And so, just taking my own advice. Hey, you got your degree now, what is the next step? - So, the advice you got worked is what I'm hearing. - (Laughing) That's what you're hearing. - Okay. So, listen to the advisor. - Listen to the advisors, yes. Listen to the people that are guiding you and saying, "Hey, take that next step." Sometimes it's gonna be maybe from a full-time to a TR and just, I guess it's one of the things that has always made me an advocate for the Reserve is that you can really balance your life and kinda go these different statuses to really suit maybe the changes that are going on in your personal, professional. - Right, no, now when I got transitioned off of REGAF and I was lucky enough that the personal network helped me find a Reserve job, it was actually my active duty commander, called a Reserve commander and said, "You need to take this guy like tomorrow." So, that's what got me into the Reserve unit that I started off with which helped out a lot and I was going to school full-time and then I started building my own business while doing that and kept me going. But I was asked to be a First Sergeant. So, I was a First Sergeant for a few years. And then after a few more things going on in my personal life, I found an opportunity opened up for the AGR program. So, I took off the diamond, went into an AGR position as a flight chief and worked my way up all the way to squadron superintendent in that unit before coming down here to Texas and finding another squadron superintendent where I was asked to consider being a group superintendent. There you go. So, but I wanted to kind of flesh out the point I think you were making with the cross training and the different jobs, right? So, it wasn't necessarily each position was always what led us there, right? It was the professionalism. It was the ability and the additional duties that were put on us that we constantly proved our worth. Improved our capability, so that we were given more opportunity and each one of those opportunities led to one more opportunity, which follows the next opportunity to success where the rumor is that Chief Bishop kicked you in the backside to get you to apply for the officer position. Is that true? -

Yes, I would say the other portion too. So, while I was career advising, when we talk about dual hatting, like you're currently doing, I was dual hatting as the command chief exec and he was the group superintendent and command chief. And so there I was, you know, just working with him, getting everything lined up for the things that he was doing. And he was in that role where it was like, hey, let's get those folks that we need to take that next step and to consider it. And at the time the Deserving Airman Program and it was, "Hey, you're doing great work here. Maybe this is something that you should really look into and the chips will land where they may, but you should definitely take the opportunity." - And that kind of leads me to another point. As supervisors it's, you know, sometimes our airmen don't necessarily see the same things we see in them. So, we see a lot of potential. After being in leadership roles or being in as long as you and I have, we see all kinds of airmen come and go and we see some of those attributes that are out there. And then just kind of having those airmen believe in themselves and take that chance. Giving them that opportunity to step forward. And that's really something I'd like to hit on is when given that opportunity; it's what you make of it. More often than not somebody in leadership said, "Hey, take this on. I want to see where you're going to go with it 'cause I think that you could do something different. I think you can do something good with this." And then making the most of each one of those opportunities and gaining speed on that, right? - Right, absolutely. I think, you know, getting to like, well, how I got here and how I'm here now, I think that also brings me to, again, like that family portion. So, my husband is in the Guard. And so, looking for, he advanced with an opportunity here in the area, and then just started off with something that was kind of temporary and then moved into something that was permanent as an AGR. And then again, being in that part where I had to reflect on, okay, I have something secure where we currently are, what is it gonna take to now make a decision that would possibly be best for the family and still continue advancing and doing things in my career that where I can learn something new. And so, how I got here now is kind of, I had my spouse and he was looking for some other opportunities also to grow and then taking again that leap of faith of, hey, I was in a full-time position and I transitioned into a traditional Reserve position and eventually ended up in what's now a AGR position. And so, that brought me into a new status for the first time. - Yeah, no, as a reservist, I let's see, I've been to, let's see, one, two; I'm on my fourth base as a reservist, right? In different states even. It's almost, it mirrors my REGAF experience, but I started out in a number of different GSUs. And I've been to a part of a couple of different wings, but it was always trying to jump in there, find that space that you can grow in and take the opportunities as they came. I can't say that every assignment was perfect. I know that when the assignment was very challenging for me, it's something that helped, helped me grow where I had some issues with my supervision at the time, but was able to work through it with them in some cases and other cases that was just one of those relationships where I had to find a different type of opportunity. But what I'm getting at is it wasn't easy, right? Would you argue that it's been an easy pathway for you? - Yeah, no, I would say it hasn't always been easy, but I will say that I think the advice that I've always received is, "Hey, when you're having difficulties in that communication, maybe with the supervision, just remember that this circumstance

it's temporary, don't lose sight of the goals that you're trying to accomplish." Let's say, the work is challenging, or the leadership is challenging. This position has presented many, many challenges that I never expected. But still, I've been able to continue to do my PME and just kind of having that mindset of, it's going to be difficult, just keep going down the path. If life were easy, if being in leadership was easy, everyone would sign up and would be doing great at it. And so, just that realization that it's not and you just have to take feedback from every angle that you can get it and ask for it too. - There's two points that you've made that I think that really gotta highlight. It's that education piece and then when you were talking about the PME piece. Both of those points go to when you have the time and you have the capability, sit yourself forward. Go ahead and knock these things out. Anytime when it comes to promotion, being promotion ready, it's A, what's the paperwork look like? It's the boxes that have to be checked. Are you up to date in your education for PME? Are you up to date with your skill level? Are you up to date with your career? Are you ready to go? And then on top of that, the opportunities we discussed. Are you making the most of those opportunities? Are you showing that you're capable? Are you exuding those attributes required for promotion and required for the next opportunity? Not that your box checking or that you're hunting for rank or anything like that, but are you making the most of the opportunities? Are you setting yourself up for success? Do you have everything knocked out? Because you could be killing it and not have a mandatory item marked off for being ready for promotions. So, those things matter too. I've known a couple of individuals who were great at the job, but just didn't hit all the marks because they didn't have everything done and that slowed them down or made them miss an opportunity. So, always be ready for the opportunity and take the most of it. You never know where it's going to lead. I know when I came in the Reserves, I was like, "Look, I'm gonna make master." And that's a big thing. So, a lot of my mentors at that time, it just, you know, retired right at master. I was like, "So that's a benchmark, right?" I want to put that diamond on to be sure. I was like, "You know what? I could retire this year. I think I can do this." But every time there was another opportunity that stepped forward. It's like, "Okay, look, you're doing well here. We want to give you this other piece. What can you do with this?" And that's what kind of led me here to where I am today. And I see the same thing. And that's what I love about My Vector coming in, is going back to the problems that we have with supervision and communication was when it was looking dark, when it looked like it wasn't gonna work out, like, oh no, this is how my career is gonna end and I'm going to be so angry and bitter. I had a mentor step in and say, "Hey, look at it this way. Hey, look at this other opportunity. We know that you're capable here." And then making the most of it, not letting that one moment define, either me, my career, or my experience. What about you, ma'am? - When I think about, again, going back to how I got here and what was it, I think it's exactly like you said, is in a sense, I've always tried to surround myself with those that I see are making good decisions for themselves and remembering that we are impacted by those that we surround ourselves with. And so, being selective in that regard has been something that I think has also played a factor in the decisions that I've made and kind of how I pursued it is, there's gonna be good people around, there's gonna be bad people around you, make the decision where

you hang around and what you listen to. And remembering that, yeah, like I said, it's not always going to be easy and the whole balancing, also the part of a family and remembering that this isn't the only thing too. So when you do, you know, when I have had to step back or when I looked at pursuing other opportunities, sometimes it was to what is gonna be provide the best you know, stability maybe that I needed at that time for the family. - That's some great points ma'am. Did you have any parting words for our gladiators out there? Any words of wisdom that you want to share? - I would say first and foremost, education, definitely. I'm a firm believer. It doesn't have to be degrees, but just education, just knowing more tomorrow than what you knew today is just something that's so valuable and keeps that what we hear about that growth mindset in ourselves, that we're never done learning and having the ability to try something new and face a new challenge. - Right, now, life is a learning process, right? Long time learning process. - Absolutely. - And I definitely would say that even when you feel like you're misstepping, take a deep breath, find a good mentor, take a step back, look at the situation. More often than not you can find either a pathway around that problem, find a solution to the problem, and then get to really where you want to be. And then grabbing every opportunity and making the most of it. Might not always get to the destination you're looking for, but the journey itself can be exciting. - Absolutely. - With that, I want to tell all the gladiators, have a wonderful day. Thank you for everything you do. And till next time. (Light music)