

Ep. 47: Introducing the 35th Combat Communications Squadron

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Welcome to another episode of the "Sword and Shield." I'm Chief Master Sergeant Christopher Howard, 960th COG Superintendent, and today with me, I have- - Lieutenant Colonel Monte Buchanan, 35th Combat Comm Commander. - Chief Solis, Superintendent. - Chief Master Sergeant Letcher, 35th Combat Comm Operations Superintendent. - And Lieutenant Colonel Spink, the 35th Combat Communications Director of Operations. - Awesome, Gentlemen. I appreciate you taking the time today. You know, we just kind of want to introduce your unit, give you an opportunity to really just, you know, kind of talk about your unit, what you guys do. So that said, what does your unit do? - Well, we are magicians. We create something out of nothing. - (Laughing) Gotcha, okay. - Combat communications, anywhere in the world you pick a point. If you can see the sky, we can create a communication. So whether it's a voice, video, radio, telephone, secure, non-secure, we can make it happen. And we come fully equipped with our own power production, our own air conditioning folks, our own tents, our job's in tents. We literally work out of tents. And we're kind of outdoor airmen and we get a lot of sunshine and a lot of winter. - Awesome. So you mentioned a lot of parts and pieces to making that magic happen. What AFSCs do you guys have in your unit? - We have a total of 12 AFSCs within the squadron. We have 17 Ds, three Ds, all flavors. 1X. Or X1s, X2s, X3s. We have three DOs, X2s, X3s. Two FO-X1s, 3EO X2s, three 1X1s. Three F5s and eight F triple ops. So what does that mean in layman's terms? We got vehicle maintainers. I'm sorry, we don't have VM. We do have power pro HVAC. We have all the flavors of the 3Ds under the rainbow with the exception of a spectrum manager. And our bench is fairly healthy, but we're always looking for growth opportunities outside of our unit. - Yeah, one thing I didn't hear and there was a kitchen sink, my goodness. So definitely a lot of different AFSCs right? And when we look across the cyber wing, when we talk about 3Ds and some of those other AFSCs, we have a lot of opportunities of cross flow between other units within the wing and you. Are there any particular skills that you guys look for or attributes in airmen that you're looking for to recruit for? - Senior Letcher, run with that one. - Yeah Chief, we actually are looking for motivated people that really like doing outdoor things. As the Commander said earlier, we have outdoor airman. We offer a lot of interesting schools that go very technical on servers, and satellite equipment, and infrastructure equipment. So those skills that people are interested in learning more about them. One of the interesting things we do when we deploy, we build our own domains. Most of the time as airmen in the cyber community, you're working on

asset or other domains that are already pre-established. When we deploy we build our own from the ground up. So the guys learn how to turn things from a blinking cursor to a fully operating server suite with every type of service you would see on a normal network. And that's a DOD level network. - Okay, go ahead. - I was going to say, Chief, one thing about our unit. We're an old unit and you know, the old mission that's been around. The 35th grew out of the 35th Communications Squadron Command that was in 1949, I believe. - Oh wow. - And we've kind of progressed from them. And actually our emblem was approved in 1950 and it was, the historians tell us that it was written by a or drawn by Disney artists. So it's a very unique emblem and you'll see those around the world because we have stickers and we like sticking them in every place that we've been. Our unit's been around, you know, around the world. We have folks out the door all the time and I think we have what? We've missed two continents so far. - Yeah, we've got two comments left, and we're working on getting there. - Yes, we're trying to get there so that we can do that. So we're just an old mission and combat comm, expeditionary comm is a skillset and a mission set that the Air Force and the combat commanders really need right now. So just a little brief history. - No, I love the history, right? You definitely have a unique emblem. One that really stands out and to hear about that history is phenomenal. And that tie back to Disney is just incredible, right? And in the timeline, right? When we look at where the cyber wing is right now being five/six years old as a wing or as an organization coming from the group into the wing now. And the wing only being a couple of years old itself. You know, to have that legacy that combat comm and the 35th specifically brings to the table is phenomenal. You know, and you bring into this a whole thing of expeditionary comm, expeditionary forces, and hitting all the two continents that's incredible, right? You don't necessarily see that in other mission sets. So with that said, could you kind of give me what a day in the life of one of your airmen look like? - Oh. Busy. - (Laughing) Nice. - We really, you know, besides training, you know, your normal skills, where you come out and work on your, whether it's a satellite communications, or radios, or servers, the infrastructure piece, you know, we have big toys. We have 10K forklifts, big (indistinct) and five-ton trucks. We have some really cool Polarizes that are four wheel drive. So if you like ATVs, you know, it's really a nice facility. And we live in a gated community on Tinker, literally five acres of fenced compounds, complete with the softball field, and a basketball court, and a playground. And yes, I said playground. And we haven't got a hot tub yet, so- - Well, we gotta work on that right? (Laughing) Something. - Oh, you have, I'm sorry. The old man in me kicked in. (men laughing) Chief, go ahead and talk about the typical UTA. - So a day in the life of the airman at the 35th, and my Ops Super's here, so that's really his wheelhouse. So he's going to jump in and fill in the blanks if I miss anything. But from the time our airman show up, we are absolutely hitting the ground running. We have prided ourselves in the last two years of doing a lot of process refinement within the squadron. And what we mean by that is anywhere we saw waste. And in our opinion waste is time. Anywhere that we could shape time and give it back to our airmen we did. So you won't see a lot of meetings on our drill schedule. Our members don't show up to run immediately into some sort of meeting in order to find out what the heck it is that they're going to be doing that day. What they do is show up and

they're in an immediate in brief on the mission that they're about to start performing. So why do we do that? Well, time is expensive in our business. On average a Combat Commer takes 36 months to get cockpit qualified. We've shaved that into 18 months, which is unheard of. How did we do that? Process refinement and improvement. So we had to do a lot of out of the box thinking in order to get our readiness where it needs to be quick, fast, and in a hurry. That doesn't happen without the entire team being on one sheet of music. And we've managed to do that by creating the Commander's Battle Rhythm in our UTA schedule. And that literally is our gospel Bible, if you will, of how we do business. In every single drill without fail you will see a equipment being worked on, airman turning wrenches, or doing something that is related to their deployment tasks or their upgrade training. So I don't want to say we're a completely well-oiled machine here but we're definitely well on our way. And I think we're setting the standard. - And we do a lot of exercises as well. And Colonel Spink can speak on that as well. - Absolutely. What Chief Solis was saying, that we always want to make sure folks are working on the equipment. We live to deploy. Again, the idea is that our unit is prepared at most when the nations are least prepared. And so we want to make sure that everywhere we go, that we are prepared mentally, physically, financially, spiritually to go ahead and deploy at a moment's notice. And that requires a tremendous amount of technical capacity, technical capability on the gear that we have. And it's again, that's a wide range of gear from satellite communications, to radios, to servers, to the end user laptops and equipment, a track machines, generators, trucks and, you know, there are so many different qualifications that we have for our vehicles. So there's a lot that we can bring to the fight from a technical capability but also we have to be mentally prepared as well. And we can talk a little bit more about that later as far as how real it goes. But the important part is that we have to train like we fight. And so there's many different opportunities to go out into, as the Commander said we have five acres. We go ahead and we drill our Sergeants in. We also are very blessed to have a large training area just North of the Tinker Air Force base, just across the street that we use as a secluded area as well. But the concept is this, is that we have to be prepared for a full spectrum of operations. And so our exercises run the gamut from, "Hey, here's a suitcase style communication set up "that you're going to have to go ahead "and set up in the top floor of a hotel room somewhere "in the middle of Africa." So you train the two to three airmen that would be primary on that. You need to be able to do that. All the way to a full blown, what we call a large Combat HLCP that is able to support up to 2000 users on an air stationary wing. Now we focus on the technical side of this is how you get comm up, but we also look at field craft. How do you respond to the platoon level encouraging? How do you set up a perimeter? How do you do site defense? How do you interact with the local population? You know, it goes much more beyond, can you just set something up and have ones and zeros communicating back to each other, which is as important as our mission. But it goes beyond that because of what the task that we've been asked to take on. We're able to go into locations that we may be one or few US military representatives. And so we need to know how to interact and defend the site, defend ourselves, and engage with those that are around us. So the exercises that do really run the gamut from that cultural piece to make sure that we're in

scenarios that airmen are able to really exercise those skills, and also to again, using our equipment. Because again, that's where we're going to get sent out. The teams that we get sent on, we have strategic airmen. We can have a Senior Airman leading a team to go ahead and deploy to, depending on the mission set, to go out there and lead a team. To ensure that we have the Comms up to get the ATO to the necessary folks to be able to embed with joint units that go out on different tasks all across the world. So it's very important for us that we develop not only the technical capacity but also the cultural and mental capacities of our airmen. So lots of exciting things. Lots of different items to check for across the spectrum of operation and our exercises are very unique at that. So every exercise is different and we're excited to continue to produce airmen that will raise a hand to the challenge. - Right? No. I mean, you make some great points, right, of how you kind of do the training there. And you kind of touched a little bit on the deployment piece. When we draw both of those together, what does your deployment cycle look like for that airman that's excited about that opportunity to actually get out in the field, and be part of something that, you know, really says this is part of the military experience? - Senior Letcher, why don't you take that one? - Chief, that's a great question. So from our perspective here, we have the opportunity for an airman to do a deployment every three years, to be able to go out the door as a minimum participation. But as a maximum participation, we have opportunities that come up annually where they could be out the door almost all the time. We've had some airmen that have stayed out the door for almost two years straight, jumping from one exercise to another to be able to get the training, to be able to get that expertise, and be able to get the time to learn how to do this mission set. A lot of it depends on the member. What do they want to get out of their time and their service in the reserve? - Okay. - They do have a lot of opportunities. - Gotcha. No. So now to draw both those pieces together, right? We have exercises, we have deployments. You know, what do you guys do to develop your team as a whole, you know, when we talk about the whole airmen concept? - Well, that's kind of two pieces or several pieces of that, Chief. You know, like Colonel Spinks said, we may send out a senior airman, a senior communicator. So we focus on developing our airmen to be leaders first. If they're technical they get in tech school then we teach them technical, but we teach them to be leaders. Because they're going to have to take a team out. So they start getting responsibilities at a young, early in their career. I don't want to say young but earlier in their career. And we continue all that. And the training itself, the Chief had a concept for training between him and the team they really developed it. So, I'll let the Chief talk about that. - So to answer what I think you're looking for here, Chief, is that we as a unit rally around from the top down on the enlisted force structure to develop our airmen from literally day one. And that starts from the moment they hit rainbow flight, we already have an in with them. And they are actually brought over to our unit to make introductions. We walk them around and give them a 5 cent tour that they see what they're going to be a part of, right? So we wrap our arms around our airmen early, fast, and in a hurry. Upon arrival into the unit after BMT Tech School they immediately go into the training cell, and that's where they're going to live. And they're going to learn all of the basics of any 3D or any AFSC for that matter. We are AFSC Agnostic in this organization. And what I mean by that is

regardless of what you're on at UTC, we train you on every and any aspect on whatever team you are assigned. We teach 3Ds how to work on generators. That doesn't mean they're turning wrenches but they know enough to be dangerous, right? - Right. - Because in our business, there is no guarantee that the guy to your left or the gal to your right is going to be there. - Right. - We have to operate under the assumption that everyone at any given point in time could be the next man or woman up. So that's how we train to fight. So when it comes to professional development in the 35th, we take it deadly serious. So much that the Commander has allowed us to take literally hours out of his UTA schedule, where we commit and dedicate time into pouring wisdom and knowledge into developing our next leaders, our next supervisors, et cetera, and so on. We have working lunches with all of the senior NCOs. We have professional development that is religiously happening one hour out of every drill. And what do we do? We choose a topic that is geared specifically towards developing a skill set that we need in our airmen in order to be the next generation of leaders. We do that from day one. We don't hurry up and wait and try and figure out who's going to be the next one to be promoted into what position. We know that probably a year or two in advance because that's how we're managing our documents and our people. - And we also have Lieutenant Colonel Spink, does his Deployed Leadership training every UTA and that helps develop our senior NCOs, and any NCO that wants to sit in on it on how to run a deploy site, how to be that senior person on the ground at a large site. 'Cause a large site, it can be a Master Sergeant taken out and we were having that happen right now. We're having a Senior take a huge package out. - Gotcha. - That's why they're trained. - Yeah, no. I mean, some great initiatives there. Definitely some models to take back to the rest of the wing. And I kind of feel like this might be a redundant question but what makes your unit great? - The people. - Okay. - And their attitudes. If we start on a UTA, most units you'll see him sign in at 7:30 and then they're gone by 16:30. We roll in the door at 5:30/six o'clock, and I'm kicking people out at 1800. - Gotcha. - And they just, it's the work ethic. It's the ability to get dirty, sweaty, workout outside. And we have the smartest airmen in the Air Force. My enlistment was actually on a stone tablet. (Chief laughing) And I have watched airmen throughout my career. The group airmen we have now is the brightest minds I have witnessed. And our leaders, we have developed leaders in this mission set for sure that I would follow to the ends of the earth. And it's our airmen that make it happen. Our job is to just stay out of their way and let them do it. And innovation, and we try to follow what the Chief of Staff says, "Let's fail fast, fail forward." And there is no risk of innovation in this squadron. You are allowed to innovate. And if you don't do it right the first time, figure out what you did wrong and let's press, change direction, adjust fire and move. - No. That's awesome. - What's also great about the unit is that we have this balance of innovation and experience. But right now the folks on here on the phone, we represent 60 years of combat comm experience, the four of us. Speaking from a combat comm unit on the active duty side, and the strength that we have. There's only three combat units here in the Air Force Reserve. The strength that we bring though is just that depth of experience. I'm here to say in active duty combat comm units where folks are in and out, you know, they PCF. It's just one type of unit that a communicator (indistinct) in their entire career. Whereas the team that we have has

been working together for decades and when it comes to a time where we exercise, or we have competitions, or we integrate with other units that experience is certainly seen. And the incredible joy that I have when it comes to this unit is that, yes, we have conventional experience that we're leveraging. And it's not just the same throughout. I mean, we have folks like Letcher and Chief Solis that have come from other units that are outside. So again, my desk is tactical communications cherries on there. And we're proud of our heritage but we don't let it limit us. - Right. - And that we can say, "Hey, you know we've tried this. "We know how this operates." But there is such a flexibility and resiliency that comes to introducing new ideas that airmen have. Saying, "Hey, you know that may have been great 10 years ago "but times have changed. "Let's figure out a new thing." And it allows us not be stagnant. But to again leverage that experience that we've all had, and we're used to flying, we're used to exercising, we're used to living in the dirt. And we can then take that and use that as a springboard, stand on the shoulders of giants, so that we're able to then move our community as a whole that is the whole Air Force Combat Communicators forward. - Okay. Awesome. Yeah, now that kind of sets the stage for what is the, what do you see as the future for your unit? - Well, currently in the Air Force there is not enough of our mission set in the Air Force to meet the Combat Commander's demand. We are a high demand mission set and service and capability. And it's just busy. That's about the only thing. If you want to come, you know, come and be busy all the time and go and move, then this is a place for you. - Awesome. Okay. You know, that demand signal is only going up, right? And I know we talk about expeditionary comm as being something a little bit different than cyber, but the reality is it's all part of the same network. It's all part of the same pieces. So, you know, definitely I would like to see a lot more cross flow, taking some of that unique experience, that leadership development that you guys have and bringing that to some of the operations squadrons. And taking some of those 3Ds that need some of that leadership development, some of that expeditionary thought processes put in place and come to a unit like yours. What do you think about that? - We've actually, we have the unit office now, we went out in the field with them before. We've worked with them. We've worked with folks from some of the nauseous. We always welcome folks to come out with us on our deployments because when we move, we don't have a problem getting an airlift. And we have plenty of room because, you know, we'll fill up a C17 and there's room for seats on that. And we like taking folks with us and participate in training. And go ahead and Letcher, Senior. - Interestingly enough, Chief, this year alone we have two different squadrons that are going to be coming and spending their AT here with us, and doing some field training. They're going to get them into leadership training for their Senior NCOs and officers with our full-time AGRs. And the airmen are going to get some hands-on tactical training with our AGR Tech Sergeants main. They're going to be learning how to build servers from the ground up. They're going to be learning how to set up and operate in the field. And getting the chance to kind of see this mission set, see if it's something they like. - Awesome. Now, I mean you guys are doing some great things out there. I can tell you from a leadership at both the groups at the wing sees the great things happening at the 35th and then the combat Comms as a whole. I can't say thank you enough for everything that you guys do, for

the sacrifices that your team makes. When we look across our enterprise, you know, the demand signal for you, your unit, your mission set is high, rotation is high. And we put a lot on our airmen and they are performing outstandingly, right? Hands down. Some great work. Do you guys have any parting shots for any of the gladiators out there? - Well, we are an organization that embraces innovation. We embrace hard work and the saddest position in this squadron is being the one that is waving as the person that's either on the ramp, getting on an aircraft, or at the airport going for a deployment because that's what we live for. That's probably one of the hardest positions. Hardest things being in my position is not going out with folks. - Gotcha. - And it's ingrained in the culture. It's an ingrained in the attitudes. The hardest working group of folks that I've ever had the pleasure to work with. And it's just, if you want to go to some fun places and do some good stuff, you have to work to do it, but the opportunities abound. - Gotcha. - Hey Chief, for those airmen out there that are listening if they're interested in our mission set, and would like to know more, have them talk to their Supervisors. Talk to their leadership and see if they can come out here for their AT. - Okay. - We'd love to host anyone throughout the wing. They can come out and learn about our mission, get some hands-on training, get some good field experience. And if it's something they like, it's a great opportunity to expand their palate and their knowledge set. - Awesome. - We are planning a room for them too, Chief. I mean, the size of the gated community thing. We do have a large facility. It's a beautiful facility, plenty of room to train. And we always just love having folks come out. Chief, I think you had something. - Awesome. - Yeah, Chief Howard, this would be my ask to every airmen or officer out there that's listening to this podcast. So here's my ask. If you're frustrated and you feel like, you know, your career is boldly going nowhere and you need a change. Then I would invite you to get out of your comfort zone, try something different, and go camping with your friends with combat comm, hooaah. - Awesome (laughing). - Yeah, we do try and, you know, we have other opportunities. We try to schedule a super UTA every two or three years, and what that is four days out in the field. And we actually have aggressors and everything else. So you get to shoot blanks or sham rounds at each other, and play in the dirt and, you know, listen to things blow up. So it's kind of like playing paintball with real weapons. It's a fun exciting time, it's tiring. But again, the reward at the end is absolutely worth it. - Gotcha. Awesome. I'll have to make a reservation sometime soon. Definitely at a Camp 35. I want to say thank you for your time. Thank you for sharing about your mission, sharing about your airmen, and getting the word out there about some of the great things you guys are doing. With that said, I want to tell all the gladiators out there, thank you for everything you do. Thank you for the efforts that you make. Thank you for your sacrifices and to hope you have a great day. (Relaxing soft rock music)