

## Ep. 52: Resiliency and suicide prevention

Welcome to Sword and Shield, the official podcast of the 960<sup>th</sup> Cyberspace Wing. Join us for insight, knowledge, mentorship and some fun, as we discuss relevant topics in and around our wing. Please understand that the views expressed in this podcast are not necessarily the views of the U. S. Air Force, nor the Air Force Reserve, and no endorsement of any particular person or business is ever intended. (Light music)

Good day, gladiators. Thank you for listening to another episode of the "Sword and Shield" podcast. It's Frances Martinez, Director of Psychological Health for the 960<sup>th</sup> Cyberspace Wing, here with a guest, retired Chief Master Sergeant Todd Simmons. Welcome, Chief. Thank you for joining us today. - Hey, good morning. Hey, I really appreciate the invite, and I'm definitely happy to be out here and share some time with you and the team. - Absolutely. I'm really excited to have you a part of this podcast, and you know, we're always talking about resiliency. I heard your story at the Department of the Air Force resiliency workshop, and I really wanted your story to be shared across our wing. When we talk about, you know, mental health, suicide, resiliency, you know, you encompass all of that in how you overcame all of your challenges. And I want people to know that, you know, you can always come out of the other side, and it doesn't always have a negative impact. And that's again, that's the stigma within the military. That's, you know, what we're trying to demystify right now. - Absolutely. Yeah, and I appreciate you guys' efforts in this because it's about communication, right? It's about breaking down those artificial barriers that we have, the thinking that there is not help, there is not people out there who are willing to lend a hand. So I am excited to be here today and definitely excited to be part of keeping the conversation going. - Yeah, absolutely. So why don't you tell us a little bit about your background? I know that we just talked a little bit, and then you said you're very happy being retired. So if you want to talk a little bit about your military career and then, like, what you're doing today. - Awesome. Yeah, so you know, I joined the Air Force in 1994, so came in as security forces defender, spent 20 years as defender. And I'm an honest person, just like a lot of airmen, a lot of our civilians, a lot of our officers out there, you know, you come in, you're young, you're not sure what you want to do, and honestly, being a defender wasn't it. But I became a security force defender, and I absolutely fell in love with the career field. And I spent 20 years as a cop, and then I became a Command Chief at Edwards, and ultimately, Command Chief at Air University up at Maxwell where I retired. 25 and a half years of service, happily retired, married with two kids, met my wife as an A1C, and we got married 120 days later, and two beautiful daughters at 24 and 19, and retired, and I live in the DC area where I started my own leadership development company, where we do everything from resiliency training to leadership training to certifications. And I've been just rediscovering myself after, you know, 25 years in the military, you know, starting as a 18 year old kid. So this last 18 months has been a journey of self-discovery, a lot of golfing, a Topgolf membership that I go to every other day, a lot of just, you know, those friendships that, you know, you thought she

didn't have time for, and things you didn't have time for, just being honored, blessed to have the opportunity to still be in a position to now give back to my community, and just give back to my family and friends, and be Todd Simmons, more importantly. Discover who Todd Simmons, instead of Chief, which was my first name for about seven years. So happy to be here. - Well, you know, it's always difficult. I know my husband just retired in February after 20 years of service in the Air Force, and so it's always difficult that transition phase, right? And I know you're 18 months post retirement, but I mean, how did you, you know, start that self-discovery, and what did that look like for you? Man, it just, it looked, I will tell you, it looked very beautiful and very ugly at the same time. And I'm just very honest, right? Because you know, coming in as an 18 year old kid, and I know we'll get into it, and facing a lot of the challenges I had, you know, early in my career, in middle in my career, towards the end of my career, and overcoming a lot of those things, you know, it was, you know, I kind of stepped away from the Air Force. And I, you know, I had a plan. I think I had a pretty solid plan and most of us do, but you cannot plan for not being who you were for 25 years and what that's going to feel like because you've never done it. So I will tell you, it was about three or four months of some very tough self-discovery of, you know, who am I, what am I, you know, what am I really not going to do like for jobs or for finances or anything, but, you know, what am I going to do to make myself feel fulfilled and to feel like I have a purpose every day? And I took a couple of months, and I will tell you, the same networks and the same methods that got me through some of my earliest challenges in the military overcoming, you know, all kinds of stuff is when I reverted back to for the self-discovery journey. I reverted back to the friends, the trusted relationships, old commanders, old first sergeants, people who now were retired, and just really went and hung out and became who I was, grew my beard, and, you know, just hung out in the backyard and let life just come at me and not just try to run toward it. And I'll tell you, you know, it just was a great thing to try to do and take some time for yourself. And I joked about the Topgolf membership, but it was one of the greatest things that I did. I went and got a Topgolf membership next to my house, and I spent about five or six hours at Topgolf about three, four days a week. - Oh wow. - And I just hung out, and hit golf balls, and just invited friends over who could come over. So it was just was about giving. And I say these two words, giving yourself the grace and the space to discover who you are. And that was the success that I had is I gave myself the grace to be like, I'm not going to have the answers, I'm not going to figure this out in the timeframe that I want to. And I gave myself the space to allow it to happen, just mature naturally. - Wow, that's one of my goals is to learn how to golf. So if I'm ever in the DC area, we'll have to get together. And then you can take me to Topgolf and show me a little bit about golfing there. - Absolutely. It is so rewarding if you're an outside person, but it's definitely an expensive sport to be in. - Oh, I hear that. I hear that. And so I know you had some very difficult challenges in the beginning. And one of your stories that really, you know, touched my heart was the phone booth story. And so, you know, I know sometimes reliving these things is very difficult for some people, and I appreciate your willingness to share the story, but I'm going to turn it over to you, and, you know, talk a little bit about that. - No, I appreciate it. And you're correct, I mean, I will tell you not, you know, I don't

consider myself a hero or the word brave or anything. And I will tell you, I started telling this story about four years ago, four or five years ago, out of, essentially, some shame I had for myself that, you know, I was a senior enlisted leader, and I had a young airman struggling, and she attempted to take her own life. And I just wondered, you know, our stories are powerful, and our stories are powerful and sometimes they can help other people. So for me, that story you're referring to was, you know, about 120 days after I got to my first base in 1995, which was Air University, by the way, the same base I retired out of as the Command Chief. - Oh, wow. - So I got to my first base at Air University, a brand new airman basic, and the 120 days I got there, and I loved the Air Force. I was a bushy, you know, not to make the story long, but you know, I was a very motivated airman. I showed up to my base, and I loved everything about the opportunity to be an airman in the United States Air Force. And within 120 days, I found myself in a place that I never ever, I just, I found myself in a place that I could not imagine. And I went from bright-eyed airman to 120 days to about two consecutive days, sitting on a security forces post with a rifle in my mouth. In the first day, trying to rehearse how I was going to take my life. And the second day, I rehearsed how I was going to take my life with a round in the chamber, with the weapon on fire, with my finger on the trigger. And actually, don't know how, and trying to really figure out how I was going to do this. And I remember that day because I jumped out of the vehicle that day, and I ended up walking around the Air Force Reserve C-130, and I was crying. And I was just, did not know what to do. And the next day, I ended up, you know, back then, we didn't have any cell phones. So the next day, I was in my dorm room, and I decided to go downstairs and call the one person I, you know, at the time I trusted and had a relationship with was just my mom. And I called, and I told her, "I'm going to take my life if you don't come get me. I gotta get outta here." I was having some bad issues in my squadron. I felt trapped. I felt like I had no one to turn to. And I told her I was going to take my life. And my mom, you know, man, I put her through a lot, and she just, she didn't know what to do. My mom never left three states. She didn't even know how to come get me or anything. So I'm crying, and I'm tearing this phone booth up, and I ended up tearing all the glass out of this phone booth. And I still have cuts where I've covered, you know, some with a tattoo, but I have, you know, I tore the glass out of this phone booth because I was so distraught. I couldn't pull the phone boot open with a simple pull to get out. I was pushing the door, so I broke the glass. I cut my arms up, trying to get out. I just totally, you know, just was in another state. And I would tell you that, you know, in that moment, my First Sergeant was doing a dorm walk through. And my First Sergeant pulled me out of the phone booth, essentially, and said, "How can I help you?" Important words that I use to this day, and I repeat those words over and over and over and over again in any leadership job I've ever had. How can I help? He didn't yell. He didn't scream. He didn't cuss. He didn't go for the disciplinary route. He said, "How can I help?" And, you know, in that story, you know, it was about that moment, but it was about the care that, and the grace and a space that that First Sergeant gave me and my leadership gave me. And I ended up, you know, going through the chaplain. I ended up becoming, and a chaplain, at that point, became something that, for the next 20 years of my career, became somewhere where I've found probably 90% of where I

got my help. But he got me back on track, and he gave me the opportunity. But you know, that story resonates, you know, to me because that's just a fraction of the story for time, but, you know, why I go back to that phone booth story is that there are people out there who are just looking for someone to say, "How can I help?" And to do with sincere, heartfelt, genuine outreach. And I think we all have that. I think we all want to help, but it starts, you know, not when someone is in the phone booth at that final moment, it starts every day with compassion. It starts every day with empathy. It starts every day with just saying, "How are you doing?" "How can I help?" So, you know, that story to me, you know, I can tell that story in about 50 different ways. And I know for the sake of time, we can't have the two-hour version, but I'll tell you, it's definitely something that I think about every day, every day. And that phone booth is something that's not there anymore, but as I came back 21 years later to Air University being a Command Chief, I drove past the spot every day to work where I tried to take my life, every day. And I will tell you, that was such a powerful moment. Yeah. - Yeah, what did that bring up for you, being able to kind of, you know, face that where you were, you know, 21 years before, and kind of, you know, have those very distinct memories of that event? - Oh, it brought up a lot of emotion the first day. I mean, the first day, from my house, I could see where I tried to take my life. So you walk out of the Command Chief's house at the front door, I literally can see where I stood at. I was in a Ford Taurus, essentially, trying to take my life. But every day I drove past, it gave me strength, and it gave me strength to persevere through how difficult it was for me to stand up, not only to talk about taking my life, but to also stand up about not being able to read at the age of 17, 18, not reading my first book till I was 20, coming in with extreme education deficit. It gave me strength to know that my story is powerful, that this 18 year old kid that came in the Air Force on an ASVAB waiver, came to his first base, which is the largest university system in the world, tried to take his life, is standing here as the senior enlisted leader for the largest university in the world, and is a college professor for the last 15 years. So going past that spot every day gave me strength to tell people that where you started is not where you have to be. What you feel today is not what you have to feel tomorrow. - Right. - What plagues you today can be solved. It could be resolved. And guess what? That's what it brought up to me every day. - And I think that's very powerful, right, because when you're in that moment, everything feels like it's overwhelming, it's going to be better, you know, without really realizing all of the ripple effects of, you know, what could have possibly happened. And it's important to, you know, talk about all of these things that no matter how monumental your problems feel, there's always a solution, and suicide is not that solution. - No, I wholeheartedly agree. And I would tell you, that 19 year old Todd Simmons, the strength of "how can I help," and the strength of learning those skills, and the strength of people surrounding me with the compassionate empathy, it actually saved my life two more times. Because, you know, I tell people, at the end of the day, in the metrics that we measure in the United States Air Force, and that's not my metrics, that's the United States Air Force's metrics, I was successful. I had a successful career. I was a Chief. I was a NAF Command Chief. I served 25 years. I had the blessing, the opportunity to wear Chief for seven years. And that's great, I had a great career. But what people don't see behind the curtain

is, you know, as a Tech Sergeant, I was severely depressed, and I had anxiety, and I was in mental health. As a Senior Master Sergeant, I did think about committing suicide. I lost a troop. I went through survivor's grief. I thought about so many dark days, but I had skills to get me past those things now. I had skills when I was a Tech Sergeant when I was feeling anxiety and depression to go, "I need some help. I need to go talk to someone." I had the skills when I was a Senior Master Sergeant to open up to my commander and say, "Hey, sir, I'm not good right now. I need to take a knee." I had the skills when I was a Chief, Command Chief at the NAC level, working for a three-star General to walk into the medical group with Command Chief stripes on and my picture literally behind the desk of the Airman First Class and request to talk to the BHOP. I had the strength to go say that mental health is just a part of my health. And that's where I say, you know, it's not, you know, you can gain so much strength when you're feeling down. And I tell people, it's not about... You should never, you know... We all try not to drive our cars with the gas light on, right? We do it sometimes, and then we get this panic-like feeling when the gas light comes on. And I tell people, do not wait till the gas light comes on in your life. You should actually, you should have three quarter. Your tank should be 75% filled, and then you still should be like, "Why is my tank not filled? I need to go fill my tank up." And that's the way I look at what always dealt with mental health post-1995. If I was walking around feeling like I was 75%, I was in the chaplain's office. When I felt like I was 50% as a Tech Sergeant, I needed mental health help. I needed a little more than what the chaplain could give me. When I was a Senior Master Sergeant, and I want it to take, and I was having these thoughts and feelings again, my tank was not, but I never allowed my gas light to come on again. That was the most important lesson that I took in through my life, and that's the most important lesson that I share with people. Do not allow the problems of the world, which are just natural, we all are humans, but don't allow it to get so heavy until your gas light comes on. Go get help when you really don't even feel like you do need it. - And I think the other important thing is to note that you, post your, you know, mental health treatment, you still had a fabulous career as far as, you know, you've retired as a Chief. And I think people just have that presumption or assumption that whenever, "Oh, I'm going to go seek mental health, and then there goes my career. I can no longer do what I want to do." And that's the whole fear, right? And even General Hawk talked a little bit about this, about, you know, back in the day, people would say, you know, "Don't go to mental health, or you're going to lose your security clearance." And that's just not true anymore. - That's not true. And that's a dark, I would say that's a dark part of our history that that would even be a part of our history. But I will tell you, I've had a TS clearance for well over 10, 12, 13, 14 years, I don't even know. I been to mental health. I've had positions of trust. I was the senior enlisted leader for every defender and asset or a whole year. That's 11 countries, thousands of cops all over the place. That's the position of trust, but you know what? A year before that, I had mental health treatment. Nobody has ever... You know, because I think I've always approached it like, "This is a part of my health regimen." So I never kept it a secret, but I never also made it where people were going to allow it to be something of shame. So, you know, whatever position I was in, or you know, as the NCO, Senior NCO, Command Chief, whatever, I talked about it openly with

whoever was around me. I talked about it with my support because I made it a part of me going to a dental appointment. You know, I was the person who would, like I said, I would go into med group in my uniform, and I would be proud to have an Airman First Class check me into my appointments, and I wasn't whispering about it. Hey, what can we help? I'm here for my BHOP appointment. I'm here for my mental health appointment. The same way I would walk across the medical group, and say, "I'm here for my dental appointment." - And it's funny that you see that because Major General Thomas Stolheim talks about when he was seeking mental health treatment, you know, they offered, "come to the back door," you know, "we won't put it on your calendar." And he's like, "No, I want people to see me getting treatment and know that it's okay." - Absolutely. I think that's, and I speak... It's definitely is not a... You know, leaders, everyone has their own journey. And I say, "I'm no hero for talking about this," that everybody has their time, their place, their reasons. But I do think that one of the solutions, you know, it's not going to be a program. It's not going to be anything. It's what you're doing right now, a grass root conversation at the technical level. We're going to have a conversation in our wing. We're going to normalize this. We're just going to talk about it. And in regards to what the subject matter is, we're going to get out the tough conversations because tough conversations become normalized, and normalized conversations become a part of a culture. And I think that's what we have to be as a society with mental health, and especially as a DOD, and especially as an Air Force family and community is we have to normalize the conversation. I will tell you right now, because I've talked... You know, you have no idea the hundreds of people, very successful, have great careers in the Air Force, who have IM-ed me, I've talked to in private, who I've seen come out in public because that's what they chose to do to talk about their own journey, that this is who we are. There's nothing off. There's nothing broken. There's nothing wrong with you. This is being a human being on earth. That we will go through things, we will need this like we would need to get our tooth cavity filled, we will need to get our leg mended, we would need to go get things done. This is just another part of self-care. This is another part of healthcare. This is another part of just living. So that's where we need to get. This is just a normalized day that I'm going to go fill my tank with this part of my life. - Absolutely, Chief. And, you know, you talked about how you came a long way from not being able to read and write, and then now you have your own book out, right? "Why not me?" - Yeah, absolutely. So you know, I wrote a book, "Why not me?" And we pre-released it last week. You know, you can go to mascot.com. It's Mascot Publishing, and they have it, the pre-release, out. But I will tell you, I wrote that book to always talk about continuing the conversation, right. We're going to be on here for 20, 25 minutes of a podcast. And I'm always wanting to go, you always continue to conversation. You always continue to conversation. And I wrote that book to let folks know who I've talked to, who are in the thousands over the last four or five years of me really trying to talk about resiliency, talk about mental health, talk about suicide, talk about anxiety, talk about depression. To let people know that everyone doesn't start in the same place, first and foremost. And there are challenges of our teammates that we cannot begin to understand because they have not felt safe enough to share those things. And when we get into a space where we can show

enough empathy to people to look through the eyes of another person, and listen with the ears of another person, we can get to a point where people are understanding each other. Someone gave a young 18-year-old kid a shot, and he wasn't supposed to get a shot. I wasn't supposed to join the Air Force. I didn't have the skills. I didn't have the academics. I didn't have any of that. And a young Staff Sergeant recruiter took an opportunity, a chance on me. And I knew that day, and I know today, that I never wanted to let him down because he literally took a chance on a kid that really did not meet what the Air Force called Air Force material. And I never let him down. So I wrote that book to let people know that your stories are powerful, your stories are what sews the fabric of a true relationship, your stories are what connects people. And it's just hopefully, you know, that's what folks can get out of it is that, "Hey, my story hopefully can help someone. And if it helps somebody, that person can gravitate to help someone else." So that was the whole point of the book. - Absolutely. And Chief, I can't even imagine how many people have done the same thing that you've done, severely, you know, contemplated suicide to the point of just, you know, right before pulling the trigger. And so I want to, you know, always provide this information. So anyone out there listening, if you or someone you know are contemplating suicide, contact the National Suicide Hotline at 1-800-273-8255. Chief, again, thank you so much for joining us today and sharing your story. I know it's always difficult reliving and retelling the stories, but I really appreciate you joining us today. - No, thank you, and thank you to the team. And anybody who wants to reach out, I keep the conversation going like I said. You can always find me at [todd.simmons@courageouslead.com](mailto:todd.simmons@courageouslead.com). [Todd.simmons@courageouslead.com](mailto:Todd.simmons@courageouslead.com). I'm willing to always continue to conversation for those who want to continue it. So thank you, thank you, thank you for what you're doing and what the team is doing, and I appreciate you. - Absolutely. And congratulations on your retirement, your golf career now, and most of all, congratulations on your book. And I look forward to reading it. - All right, thank you. - Gladiators, out. (Mellow music)