





# THE STRIKER CHIEF

# *Memoirs*







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There is no greater teacher for  
Strikers across the globe than the  
lessons learned from those who have lived,  
led and experienced being an  
Air Force Global Strike Command  
team member.

Here AFGSC Command Chiefs share their  
leadership journey and advice to  
continue building 21st century Airmen  
prepared for tomorrow's challenges.

Our Airmen are always ready to  
provide long-range precision strike...

**ANYTIME, ANYWHERE!**

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CHIEF MASTER SERGEANT

**JACK JOHNSON, JR.**

*"The opportunity to  
serve in the United  
States Air Force's  
Air Force Global  
Strike Command  
was one of  
my greatest  
privileges."*





## Where it Began ...

Former United States Air Force Chief of Staff, General Mark Welsh would often say, “every Airman has a story.” My story began in early June 2009, when I received a call from the Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force. As with all our conversations, we focused on our great Air Force, our Airmen, their families and the big picture. Then suddenly, the conversation quickly led to his announcement. “You have been selected as the first Command Chief Master Sergeant to the recently announced Air Force Global Strike Command.”

Within weeks, this new command team of then Lt. Gen. Frank Klotz, Maj. Gen. James Kowalski and myself, along with other plank holders such as then Brig. Gen. Timothy Ray, Brig. Gen. Jeffry Smith, Ms. Ann Mitchell and a cadre of focused professionals, arrived at Barksdale Air Force Base, Louisiana, prepared to re-build two-thirds of our nation’s nuclear enterprise.

On August 7, 2009, with Air Force Chief of Staff, Gen. Norton “Norty” Schwartz presiding, Air Force Global Strike Command was activated along with the unveiling its new emblem.



Air Force Global Strike Command activation ceremony.



Chief Johnson helps Staff Sgt. Lawrence Blanco and Tech. Sgt. Jace Pape serve a Thanksgiving-styled lunch to maintenance troops and their families at the 341st Maintenance Group’s “turkey feed”.



Chief Johnson discusses the deployment line process with Airman Paige Garrett, 341st Logistics Readiness Squadron logistics plans apprentice, during a Global Thunder exercise.

It had been 27 years since the Air Force had stood up a major command, so our number one priority, as Lt. Gen. Klotz would often say, was to “reinvigorate the Air Force nuclear enterprise and build a model command that is prepared, accountable, and disciplined.” Maj. Gen. Kowalski would often follow up with words such as, “nuclear weapons demand a special trust and responsibility.” My focus was to transfer these words into actions as we built an enduring roadmap and executed this command’s new guidance.

The formation of this new major command’s mission, vision, and values began immediately, and was cemented during AFGSC’s first executive off-site at the National Military Park, in Vicksburg, Mississippi. The off-site, facilitated by former Commander, U.S. Air Forces in Europe, and former Air Force Materiel Command, Gen. Gregory S. “Speedy” Martin, brought some of the most knowledgeable nuclear senior mentors together. This multi-day executive assembly not only brainstormed the way ahead for the command, but established an uncompromising





Chief Johnson speaks to a group of Airmen during a professional development event.

cultural path to uphold a safe, secure and reliable nuclear enterprise.

Lt. Gen. Klotz's commander's guidance to me was exceptionally clear. Know the pulse of the command's enlisted corps, then build an unambiguous direction that aligns all enlisted matters with our newly established objectives. This created a well-organized culture, whereby mission execution, training, career development, utilization, recognition and quality of life would be second to none.

On the surface, transferring to a new command would appear routine. The departing chief would turn over his or her continuity books and out brief the gaining chief on significant topics, and a clear roadmap would be defined. In my case, the transfer of mission, resources, people and duties would

realign from Air Combat Command, reflecting the nuclear capable bomber fleet and Air Force Space Command, involving the nation's nuclear intercontinental ballistic missile fleet. These remarkable duties appear transparent on the surface, but my guidance was to review every instruction, document, program, plan and report impacting the enlisted corps in great detail at the command level. Upon completion, I was to author the new command's enlisted direction on all headquarters-level programs, ensuring that every word, thought and intent reflected the new command's standards of excellence. This involved critically reviewing hundreds of documents and files, resulting in thousands upon thousands of pages.

Building a model command and rebuilding confidence in our nuclear enterprise didn't just involve providing direction, it involved me traveling and listening. These locations included higher headquarters, such as the Joint Staff, the United States Strategic Command, the National Nuclear Surety Agency, and the Defense Threat Reduction Agency to name a few. Additionally, and most importantly, it involved discussions with multiple major commands, our numbered Air Forces, all our wings, and the enablers who contribute to the success of the nuclear



Chief Johnson speaks to Brig. Gen. Ronald Jolly upon his arrival to speak at a senior noncommissioned officer induction ceremony at Sheppard AFB, Texas.





enterprise. What I found across the command was no surprise! Exceptional leadership, profoundly dedicated Airmen at every level, and families, who not only braved some of the most unique conditions and locations, they understood that we couldn't be successful without them. The greatest privilege I had as AFGSC's Command Chief was communicating the importance of every Striker, no matter their Air Force specialty, duty location or role as family caretaker.



Chief Johnson shakes the hand of Airman 1st Class Jacob Richey, a 341st Civil Engineer Squadron structures apprentice, during a visit to Malmstrom Air Force Base, N.D..

General Schwartz often made my job easier when he coined the saying, "the importance of an Airman is not measured by their proximity to the target." That meant that no matter how close or how far you are from a nuclear weapon, you're on our team, and we need you!

Messaging to and from the Airmen and their families across AFGSC was exceptionally important. Enlisted Airmen wanted to know about topics such as cold weather gear in the north, deliberate assignment opportunities, nuclear inspections, and work-life balance, which were all major topics to me. Additionally, I was attuned to topics, such as Airmen's time, nuclear incentives, promotion statistics, quality of

life, recognizing our Airmen, and understanding the nuclear and bomber culture and heritage. These priorities were just the tip of the iceberg and were no small task, therefore I had to remain visible, involved and effective in order to successfully serve this great command and their families!

AFGSC taught me a lot about a higher level of teamwork. It was through my deeply close relationships with each numbered air force and wing commanders, along with the 8th and 20th Air Force Command Chiefs, six wing command chiefs, 21 group superintendents and 72 first sergeants, that we collectively steered a focused enlisted strategy, which impacted more than 23,000 enlisted Airmen.

As I look back on my tenure in serving AFGSC Airmen and their families, my greatest memories were seeing our Airmen protect, maintain, feed and support our nation's number one priority of undeniable nuclear deterrence. In many cases, these Airmen served under some of the most challenging environments in both the bomber and intercontinental ballistic missile communities. America will never know how difficult their duties are, and I truly believe these Strikers embody our Air Force core value of "service before self" because so much is asked of them.

Memories of AFGSC Airmen who don't necessarily work on the flight line or in the missile fields also bring special remembrances to my heart. Those Airmen were crucial to the mission and touch every aspect of the mission from medical, security, civil engineering, and personnel, all the way to education, finance, logistics and services, to name a few.



They too, were heroes to me.

We expected a lot from our Airmen, and we made sure that their efforts and hard work came with recognition and reward. In fact, we looked for every opportunity to recognize our Airmen to ensure hard work and reward always balanced.

As years have passed since my tenure at AFGSC, I've watched it achieve new heights. It has embraced new cultures of Airmen, the advancement of technology, and the perils of nuclear related language from many of our adversaries. In fact, I believe nuclear deterrence today is at its highest level in generation. This demands the greatest caliber of Airmen ever seen, and AFGSC has not only accepted that challenge, they embrace it.

Looking back on my 34 plus years of service, the opportunity to serve in the United States Air Force's Air Force Global Strike Command was one of my greatest privileges. I've had many extensive and diverse positions at squadron, group, wing, numbered air force, agency, and centers, all the way to joint, combatant commands, Headquarters Air Staff, Headquarters Secretariat and NATO levels, but none like AFGSC. I am honored today to be called an AFGSC Statesman, a title held by all former AFGSC Command Chiefs!



Lt. Gen. Frank Klotz (L) and Chief Johnson during an awards ceremony.

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CHIEF MASTER SERGEANT

# BRIAN HORNBACK

*"Just being  
present  
is what  
matters."*







## What are your thoughts on the Air Force of today ?

Since leaving the Air Force in 2014, I reflect on how much it has changed and how current Airmen have their own generational challenges. I entered during the Cold War and President Reagan's era. The policies and regulations were clear, as was the mission - nuclear deterrence. We sat alert waiting for the call.

However, the leaders were Vietnam era so the questions of whether new Airmen could handle the demands of combat always lingered (we were untested). Dollars were flowing and new weapons systems were on the horizon. Desert Storm caught us flat footed, and the Air Force changed overnight. The fall of the Berlin wall, the end of Strategic Air Command, new technologies, introduction of "don't ask, don't tell," Operations Southern and Northern Watch, the introduction of the Air Expeditionary Force, Operation Allied Force, numerous uniform changes, base realignment and closure and so many changes to include performance reporting, going from the annual performance review to the enlisted performance review.



Airman 1st Class Jared Schanen, 509th Operations Support Squadron aircrew flight equipment technician, explains pilot vests to Chief Hornback during his visit to Whiteman Air Force Base, Mo..

Now Air Force leaders and Airmen are dealing with their own generational challenges and quickly advancing technologies as the world faces new and emerging threats.

The one piece that remains constant is change and adapting to it. I believe the Air Force of today and the entire Department of Defense is doing the best they can to adapt to these rapidly changing environments the joint team operates in. The ability to remain relevant in an ever competitive market of resources (people) in so that the ability to recruit and retain the best while maintaining standards and the ability to remain lethal when America calls is a unique challenge.



Chief Hornback with a group of Security Forces Airmen.

Keeping America's Air Force an all volunteer force is what sets us apart for the rest of the world, and as long as the Air Force continues to do that, while delivering air and space power anywhere on the globe at our time and choosing, then the Air Force is doing an outstanding job!

## What words of advice can you share for those experiencing or feeling challenged by these changes?

All I would offer is to control what you control. As Airmen, no matter where you sit in the organization, you are all leaders, do your job. Do it to standards



and take care of those around you. If in charge, build your replacement and recognize that the team is stronger than the individual. Change is constant, evolutionary and continual. Understand the bigger picture behind the change and communicate it.

## **What was the biggest challenge during your time in leadership and how did you overcome?**

The Nuclear Deterrence Operations Deterrence Medal actually began with a medal and an ICBM Operations ribbon with Chief Jack Johnson. Jack and I worked to refine those awards through his tenure, then understanding the landscape during mine. I further refined it to the NDOSM and submitted only to have it denied. AFGSC and the mission was struggling to establish the right culture and brand and let alone acceptance. Beginning with Gen. Klotz and Chief Johnson, we carried the mantle of branding the command and establishing the culture. The NDOSM was finally accepted during Chief Terry West's tenure after some more challenges within the command and the feedback as to the "why" behind the challenges.

## **What drives you when faced with obstacles and challenges, professionally or personally?**

Having the outcome in mind. Please keep in mind, the outcome does not have to be perfect, only achievable so that either I or the team I lead can understand we have arrived at the goal. Having that in mind has enabled me and the teams I have been fortunate to lead to overcome the obstacles we've encountered.



Chief Hornback speaks with 1st Lt. Ryan Headrick, 91st Operational Support Squadron, in the missile training facility at Minot Air Force Base, N.D., during a "key turn" simulation.

## **What singular experience or individual impacted you the most during your service and why or how?**

As a young Airman, I wasn't the best. If I were to be measured against today's standards I would be a civilian below the zone candidate.

During one of my many trips to the Commander's office, my supervisor and Buck Sergeant (E4) asked a simple question that changed my life completely. "Why did you join the Air Force?" My response was "to change my life as I was running with the wrong crowd; making bad decisions." His response is what stopped me in my tracks and then changed everything for me. "All you did was change your physical location on the map!" That moment I knew I had to make some changes, the changes I intended to make when I joined the U.S. Air Force, and I did.





## **What is the difference in the leadership considerations needed at the Command Chief level that you would want Airmen to understand?**

As the Command's Senior Enlisted Leader, no matter the level, you represent all Airmen to the Commander and not just the enlisted. You have to be tactically aware, operationally strong and strategically relevant so engagement throughout the entire command is where you will be at all times.

## **What were your greatest strengths and weaknesses as a leader during that time?**

I was very fortunate to have outstanding leaders during my tenure. My background in Strategic Air Command and maintenance enabled me to have some immediate credibility within the command having

walked in many of their shoes before - knuckle dragger to Command Chief.

My greatest weakness still impacts me today. I am an empathetic person but not very sympathetic and often times that comes off as cold. While I can empathize with some challenges, I do not understand or sympathize as to why that should stop or inhibit someone's ability to be successful when all things are equal. I work on this everyday to be a better leader and person.

## **Do you feel there were sacrifices made to achieve your career goals? How?**

I made several as many have, however, I did not have a goal to become a MAJCOM Command Chief. The times were different when I was nominated by the wing commander at the 4th Fighter Wing. I never thought I would make the list let alone be picked



Chief Hornback speaking to Airmen during a visit to Minot Air Force Base, N.D., where he performed a B-52H Stratofortress launch, received a tour of a missile alert facility, met with Airmen from the 219th Security Forces Squadron and received a tour of Camp Grafton, N.D.



up. After my first tour at the 509th Bomb Wing I was set to return to maintenance when the Chief's Group called and aligned me with the 332d Command Chief in Balad at the same time Gen. Carpenter requested I be added to the 8th Air Force nomination. After my time at 8th AF I was set to return maintenance, and again the Chiefs Group set me up for the 379th at Al Udeid. While I was filling in as the interim for AFGSC Gen. Kowalski requested I stay on as the second Command Chief of AFGSC.

My only goal was to do 20 years. I put my head down and worked to standard ever since the day I mentioned above. The sacrifices made are really no different than our Airmen make everyday: deployments, long hours, overseas assignments, numerus, TDYs and many more.

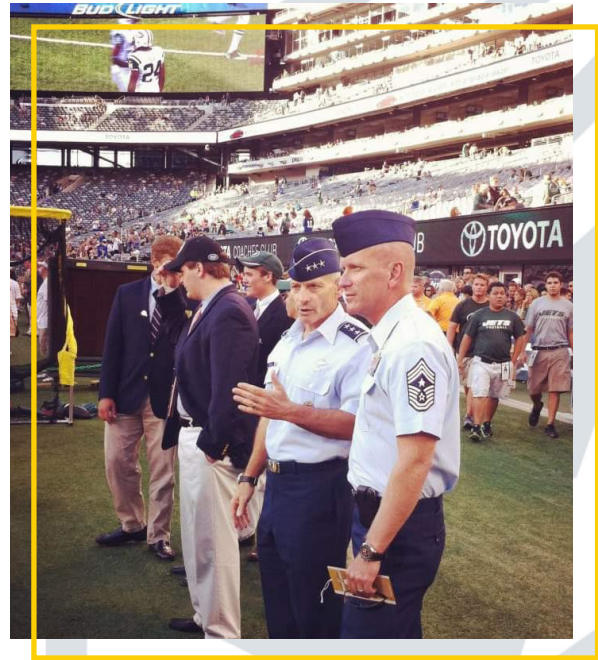
## **Can you describe a time in life where you pursued a goal, failed, but got back up and succeeded?**

I believe we all have had these moments. Missed a promotion and had to reset, failed a test, blew a milestone. As I progressed through the Air Force and now in my current role, it was always "what did I learn from that failure or miss? What can I do better on the next attempt and what were the common denominators, even if it included me?" I then worked to make those changes.

## **What legacy do you believe you left or hoped you have left on AFGSC?**

One of the areas we focused on was developing our non-commissioned officer corps into strong leaders

in deterrence mission with establishing the STRIKER STRIPE program. Having the understanding the deterrence operations underpins everything we do as a nation and that AFGSC is paramount in that mission.



Lt. Gen. James Kowalski and Chief Hornback at an NFL event.

## **Anything else to add?**

I learned something once I sewed on Chief Master Sergeant that I wish I would have learned a little earlier in my career. I stopped trying to define whether I made a difference and whether I was successful. Those two words can only truly be defined by the people work for you and who you work for. Now, that doesn't mean you shouldn't work hard every day, giving your 100% effort to be a difference maker and be successful. However, your interactions with the people you serve will define that. Taking that minute in a hallway when asked, sitting down with the team, just being present is what matters.



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CHIEF MASTER SERGEANT

**TERRY WEST**



*"We must continue  
to get better.  
Remaining status  
quo is not an  
option."*



## What are your thoughts on the Air Force of today?

This question describes one of our Air Force's greatest key strengths, diversity! Every generation of Airmen (from the youngest to the oldest, coming from the city or from the countryside, from the richest of households to the poorest, from the high school graduates to the doctorate); each one of us has a significant contribution to offer to make us better. The answer is to allow the right amount of empowerment in order to bring out the creativity and innovative thoughts to the surface, leaving no idea uncovered. We are all equally important and we must strive to bring out the very best in one another.

## What words of advice can you share for those experiencing or feeling challenged by these changes?

I think Thomas Jefferson stated it best, found on the southeast portico inside the Jefferson Monument..."as new discoveries are made, new truths discovered and manners and opinion change, with the



Chief West speaks with security forces Airmen about their new Model Defender equipment at Malmstrom Air Force Base, Montana.



Chief West speaks to Airmen from the Whiteman Air Force Base's Airmen Leadership School at the Professional Development Center during a base visit.

change of circumstances, institutions must advance also to keep pace with the times." We must continue to get better. Remaining status quo is not an option. Not only were we all created equal, but different. We must learn to appreciate the differences of others knowing that in the long run, the differences of others will help bring us together in unity.

## What was the biggest challenge during your time in leadership and how did you overcome?

A couple of things come to mind, but I think the biggest challenge was reclaiming a positive reputation for the missile professionals and the command after the "cheating scandals" in 2014. There's one thing that's certain; eventually, bad decisions surface. We all make unwise choices occasionally, but how did we overcome?

Well, first and foremost, we had to own up to our mistakes, no excuses! Of course, after a good root cause analysis and options considered, we developed an action plan to get us back on track. At that time, it was the Force Improvement Plan (FIP). This plan was





structured after the Navy and was very beneficial in monitoring and tracking our progress. Although improvements were made, it took time for the healing to take place and to regain the confidence of our Air Force leadership and ultimately the American people. What Warren Buffett said is true, “it takes 20 years to build a reputation and five minutes to ruin it.” Be on watch!

## **What drives you when faced with obstacles and challenges, professionally or personally?**

“Life is difficult.” That is the first sentence in Scott Peak’s famous book *The Road Less Traveled* (1978, p.1). Obstacles and challenges will always be present. What drives me is staying 100% focused on the end goal. Most of our best accomplishments didn’t come easy, and the ones we cherish the most are usually the ones where we overcome an obstacle or challenge. There’s something about beating the odds, ask any cancer survivor. Press forward, stay the course, and reach the mark!



Lt. Gen. Stephen Wilson and Chief West present Senior Airman David Wallace III, 91st Security Forces Group, Minot Air Force Base, N.D., with AFGSC Outstanding Airman of the Year honors.

## **What singular experience or individual impacted you the most during your service and why or how?**

I would say Gen. Stephen Wilson, the AFGSC Commander (and my supervisor) during my Command Chief tenure. Gen. Wilson had a unique way of leading. There were times we spent together working on issues and there were times we would divide and conquer. He had an unprecedented confidence in his staff, and he treated everyone with the same dignity and respect. He trusted me completely and we had an unconditional partnership. He made a lasting impression on me.

## **What is the difference in leadership considerations needed at the Command Chief level?**

At the Command Chief level there is a much larger span of control. This can present a challenge. For example, you have to make decisions based on what is best to accomplish the mission and/or what’s best for Airmen as a whole. There are times when improvements can be made for a small group (e.g. a specific AFSC, a certain wing), but at the Command Chief level, you have to implement change with a few things in mind such as how does this change help get us to mission accomplishment? How will this change affect other Airmen? Basically, you must consider the bigger picture.

## **What were your greatest strengths and weaknesses as a leader during that time?**

I believe one of my strengths was the ability to



connect with different groups of people; from enlisted, civilians and officers, to operators and support personnel, from northern tier bases to bases down south. You must be able to connect with Airmen, no matter how they differ. And by doing that, people will trust you and they'll believe you have their best interest at heart, and that open and honest dialogue is essential in leading.

As far as a weakness during that time, it may have been "follow up." What I mean is, after listening to Airmen's concerns and after making some changes, I may not have reached back out to see how things were going or if the changes hit the mark. You cannot allow yourself to lean so far forward that you forget to follow up on areas of concern.

## **Do you feel there have been sacrifices made to achieve your career goals? How?**

There's always sacrifice when reaching individual goals. The biggest sacrifice is time, meaning time taken from your friends and family, or even time from yourself. Knowing that you need a balanced life is easy to say, harder to do. There's no substitute for time! You can't get it back. Please don't apologize at your retirement ceremony to your spouse, children, and friends for missed time. Do something about it—start TODAY!



Chief West and his wife Cynthia.

## **Can you describe a time in life where you pursued a goal, failed, but got back up and succeeded?**

I had an opportunity to attend college right after high school. I even received a scholarship for tuition, a dorm room, and meal card. During the school year I allowed distractions to interfere with my academics, so I left college after the first year. I later attempted a local community college as I worked several different jobs, but I had lost my focus. After much frustration, I considered and joined the Air Force. The Air Force gave me a tremendous opportunity to not only learn a skill, but to enroll in college classes. It was a slower road, but I stuck with it. I not only completed a bachelor's degree but two graduate degrees. Just as the old saying goes, "if at first you don't succeed, try, try again."

## **What legacy do you believe you left or hope to leave on AFGSC?**

I hope I left a legacy of "thankfulness." Amid all the stressors and turmoil in life, we still have a lot to be thankful for. You may think life is tough. Look around, there are lots of things to be thankful for, count your blessings! During my tenure, I made it a priority to thank Airmen for their dedication and faithfulness...they deserve it. When I walked through the terminals in airports, American citizens would stop me and would thank me for my service. I never knew what to say...until one day I discovered in my heart what I should say, which was, "You deserve it."



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CHIEF MASTER SERGEANT

# CALVIN WILLIAMS

*"I've considered it an honor and a privilege to have been given the opportunity to serve as the Air Force Global Strike Command Chief."*







## What are your thoughts on the Air Force of today?

There is a cliché statement that states, “the key to Air Power is flexibility.” I would offer in today’s highly mobile, globally connected and technological savvy world, it is imperative that today’s Airmen remain flexible and adaptive in every aspect of their personal and professional lives.

Technological advances bolster today’s Airmen and their ability to communicate easier, faster and more effectively. The challenge is ensuring Airmen balance the benefits of technology while keeping the personal connection that can only come with face-to-face communications. There are enduring aspects of the Air Force’s culture that galvanize every generation; an adherence to the Air Force core values and being the best Air Force the world has ever known.



Tech. Sgt. William Olson, 334th Training Squadron instructor, briefs Chief Williams at the air traffic control tower simulator during his site visit to Keesler Air Force Base.

I do not spend much time comparing one generation of Airmen to other generations. I joined the Air Force when there was only one near-peer enemy and over the course of my career, the enemy evolved from a

single enemy or nation state to multiple nations, and perhaps more challenging, an ideology that is not always easy to define or backed by a nation state and in domains that were unimaginable in 1988. Today’s Airmen, powered by innovation and technology, will do what Airmen have always done since 1947...they will rise to the occasion and stand as America’s sentry and when called upon to do so be the nation’s avenger. In order for the Air Force to remain dominant, Airmen must continue to adapt to the changing world environment, exploit technology and utilize their creativity to foster innovative ideas and solutions to answer the nation’s call as failure is not an option.

## What words of advice can you share for those experiencing or feeling challenged by changes?

The best advice that I would offer anyone feeling challenged or having difficulties adapting to today’s Air Force cultural and technological changes is sharing with them the story of the Sears and Roebuck Company store. The company was founded in 1886 and enacted what was revolutionary at the time; instead of the classic brick and mortar stores, its business model relied heavily on mail order catalogs which allowed the company to reach rural consumers who did not have access to retail outlets.

This resulted in phenomenal growth and enormous profits. By 1993, the company shifted from relying on catalog to shopping malls which increased infrastructure and overhead costs, but Sears remained an industry leader. Twenty five years later, Sears, a company founded on innovative and creativity filed for



Chief Williams has lunch with 81st Training Group Airmen leadership at the Azalea Dining Facility June 10, 2016, Keesler Air Force Base, Miss..

bankruptcy due in large part to the failure to innovate and capitalize on the internet and advent of online shopping. Sears' inability or unwillingness to innovate resulted in a steady decline in retail sales, ultimately leading to the company's demise.

Although, the Air Force is not a business, Airmen must understand and appreciate that the United States Air Force is the gold standard and admired globally by Allies. It is the measuring stick for our adversaries. The Air Force's ability to continue to adapt and respond faster than our potential adversaries is the greatest challenge Airmen will face in their careers.

Airmen powered by innovation has real meaning; it is America's 'Ace in the Hole' and provides the nation with an asymmetric advantage over any would be adversaries. This advantage has been evident during every crisis since the creation of the United States Air Force. It was Airmen creativity and adaptability that allowed President Kennedy to negotiate from a position of strength during the Cuban Missile Crisis. The Minuteman missile system in 1962 represented a capability that the United States had that the Soviet

Union could not match. However, when the Cuban Missile Crisis arose, this capability wasn't fully mission capable. According to Colonel Burton C. Andrus Jr., missile commander at Malmstrom, he received an urgent call from the Strategic Air Command Commander asking if there was a way to bypass the two-command requirement. The Minuteman initial design required launch command from at least two separate control centers before any missile could launch. Airmen were able to improvise the circuitry so that missiles could be launched from one control center and the first Minuteman missiles became operational on October 22, 1962, well ahead of the projected fully mission capable schedule and ending the crisis with the Soviet Union.

## **What was the biggest challenge during your time in leadership and how did you overcome?**

The biggest challenge I faced without any doubt was how to lead following a suicide. In the aftermath of a suicide, there is a natural tendency to ask *how and why* did this happen? How did the leaders in the chain of command or those closest to the Airman miss the warning signs and indicators that the Airman was in crisis, that the Airman had suicidal ideations and would ultimately take their life?

I, like most leaders, can recall the names and details surrounding all deaths. But suicides, unlike deaths by natural causes or accidents, left a knowledge gap and so many unanswered questions.

A critical component of how I attempted to overcome this challenge came early in my career when I



was a NCOIC and airman under my purview attempted suicide. By the grace of God, she was unsuccessful. She was a single parent, and I had a professional and personal relationship with her as her daughter and my youngest son were playmates. After being notified of the event, I went into full-crisis leadership mode and begun asking myself *how and why* this happened; what warning signs had I missed and why did she not confide in me or seek help from a mental health professional.

After several months, I built up the courage to asked her whether I had failed her as a leader by missing the warning signs. She shared the *how and why* she had attempted to take her life; but more importantly she shared she had received the same suicide awareness training I had attended, and she was very good at hiding her pain during duty hours. After duty hours she struggled with severe depression and instead of seeking help she decided to end her life.

That experience taught me invaluable lessons on how to lead during the aftermath of a suicide during my time as a superintendent and later as a command chief. It taught me to not be overly critical of the deceased member's chain of command and those closest to the member; because there was the potential the deceased did not exhibit any warning signs and those same leaders were grieving for the loss of the member. It also taught me my focus following a suicide attempt or suicide had to be on being a leader who was competent and compassionate. It taught me that my focus had to be on the care for the family of the deceased and the Airmen who were impacted by the member's death. My competence as a



Chief Williams speaks during an enlisted all-call at Minot Air Force Base, N.D..

leader started by being visible and ensuring the collective team knew we were going to be there for each other both emotionally and physically. My compassion as a leader started by acknowledging my own pain and sharing my own experiences on how to deal with suicides and how we collectively were going to move forward and honor the Airmen's memory.

Full disclosure, I do not believe I ever overcame this challenge. The deaths of all Airmen stayed with me because it was my belief that the parents and family members of the Airman had entrusted the deceased member to our collective care and for unknown reasons the Airman decided to take their life. This reinforced the narrative leadership does not confer privilege or give power. It imposes responsibility and as a leader I struggled mightily with this challenge.

## **What drives you when faced with obstacles and challenges, professionally or personally?**

The driving factor in my success, both professionally





and personally has been my healthy fear of failure. I wasn't the smartest or the best, but I was motivated by my fear of failure and not wanting to disappoint those who relied on my contributions.

When I face obstacles or challenges, I utilize a deliberative approach to fully understand the issue or problem to ensure I resolve the problem and not just the symptoms. Like most leaders, I view myself as a problem solver, but earlier in my professional career, as well as my personal life, when confronted with a challenge my desire was to quickly remedy the obstacle or challenge as soon as possible and not necessarily learning from the experience. This resulted in treating symptoms associated with the problem instead of the actual problem and too many of instances of rework. My desire to fix things, and an over reliance on my experiences, made me a horrible listener. I found myself formulating my answer in my head while others were still talking, and this caused me to miss vital points that could have changed my response. The concept of 'slow down to go fast' and truly effective listening have increased my own effectiveness in my personal and professional life.

## **What singular experience or individual impacted you the most during your service and why or how?**

The collective experiences of my first duty station impacted me the most during my Air Force career. My first assignment was the Pentagon. I was surrounded by and interacted with senior leaders ranging from the Chief of Staff of the Air Force, the Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force, general officers, officers, enlisted personnel and senior civilians.



Chief Williams with U.S. Strategic Command senior enlisted leaders at STRATCOM headquarters.

It was their collective professionalism and example that kick started my Air Force career; they showed me what 'right looked like', they instilled in me a sense of pride, commitment and excellence that sustained me over the course of my near 30 year career. They were my extended family. Through the highs of having Major General Larry Dillingham conduct my first three promotions, to the lows of being there for me emotionally at my lowest point when my mother unexpectedly passed away.

Those professionals embodied the Air Force core values and servant leadership. They taught me I wasn't defined by my race, my background or upbringing. They taught me what was possible if I was willing to work hard and fully commit to the profession of arms.



## What is the difference in leadership considerations needed at the Command Chief level that you would want Airmen to understand?

I am reminded of a quote from Chief Steve Sullens who was the Chief of the Chief's Group when I made Chief back in 2005. He said, "the work of taking care of Airmen and their family had just begun and if you think you have arrived then the Air Force promoted the wrong person." Five years later I was selected to be the Command Chief at the 45th Space Wing, now Space Launch Delta 45, and a good friend and mentor Chief Linus Jordan offered some insight as it related to the role and purpose of my new Command Chief chevrons. He told me my new chevron "provided me with the avenue and opportunity to make a tangible difference in the lives of Airmen and their families. In order to be successful as a

Command Chief you must view it as you work for the Airmen and not vice versa." The leadership concept both Chief Sullens and Chief Jordan educated me on was the concept of servant leadership and how I should focus my efforts on the personal growth and well-being of the Airmen of the 45th Space Wing. Airmen at all levels should understand and embrace the concept of servant leadership. A servant-leader focuses primarily on the growth and well-being of people and the communities to which they belong. While traditional leadership generally involves the accumulation and exercise of power by the person at the top of the pyramid, the servant-leader shares power, places the needs of others first and helps people develop and perform as highly as possible. This is an invaluable attribute for those serving as Command Chiefs, but it is equally true for all leaders, from first line supervisors to Command Chief.



Members of Team Whiteman stand with Gen. Robin Rand, his wife, Kim, and Chief Williams next to a B-2 Spirit at Whiteman Air Force Base, Mo., Jan. 19, 2016. While touring the aircraft, AFGSC leadership met with Airmen to hear about weapon systems available to the world's premier stealth bomber.





## **What were your greatest strengths and weaknesses as a leader during that time?**

My greatest strengths as a leader was my ability to connect with Airmen on their level and my humility. I prided myself on being accessible and approachable and always treating Airmen with dignity and respect, no matter the circumstance.

My greatest weaknesses were my inability to strike the proper work-life balance and not focusing enough on the strategic and operational aspects of the job of being a Command Chief. Strategic planning and analyzing policies are necessary to better determine or predict the impact policies will have on Airmen and the command's mission.

## **Do you feel there were sacrifices made to achieve your career goals? How?**

I made sacrifices to achieve my career goals; I sacrificed the most important resource we have at our disposal and that is "time". Looking back there were times in which I worked longer than I should have and there were times in which I should have taken additional time off to spend time with my immediate and extended family to attend family gatherings or just be present. I was blessed to have a very supportive family who supported me and traveled with me on the journey of my Air Force career, and they understood and accepted my commitment to the Air Force as well as them.



Chief Williams assists in a Stripes for Exceptional Performers (STEP) promotion for Staff Sgt. Jessica Sonnier.

## **Can you describe a time in life where you pursued a goal, failed, but got back up and succeeded?**

As a deployed squadron superintendent, my goal was to leverage my experiences to improve the effectiveness of the unit by offering advice and counsel on how to lead Airmen, improve readiness and reporting in a combat environment. In the words of former prisoner of war Colonel Lee Ellis, my goal was to simply "engage with honor." But, I failed to understand the small group dynamics that existed in the unit prior to my arrival, and this had enormous consequences as it related to achieving the goal of leading Airmen in combat.

At every turn I was met with resistant and ultimately it led to what I once perceived to be my greatest failure when I was ceremoniously asked to undertake a special project at the behest of the squadron and group commander and no longer serve as the squadron superintendent. I asked to be redeployed instead of facing the humiliation of being fired, and



when that was disapproved, I thought of quitting and retiring. I contacted a good friend and mentor and asked her to start plans for my retirement once I arrived back at home station. She refused to approve my retirement plans but offered me some invaluable advice...never let anyone make you out to be something that you are not, and I was the caliber of leader that any commander would dream of having! As Walt Disney stated, "All the adversity I've had in my life, all my troubles and obstacles, have strengthened me. You may not realize it when it happens, but a kick in the teeth may be the best thing in the world for you."

Sixty days after being fired as the squadron superintendent I was selected to be a wing command chief and 18 months later I returned to Afghanistan as the Ninth Air and Space Expeditionary Task Force - Afghanistan Command Chief Master Sergeant.

## **What legacy do you believe you left or hoped you have left on AFGSC?**

I considered it an honor and a privilege to have been given the opportunity to serve as the Air Force Global Strike Command CCM.

During my tenure, it was never about me; my focus was on how the command could improve the lives of Airmen and their families charged with providing global strike operations and strategic nuclear deterrence.

My team orchestrated the first ever Chief Master Sergeant Select and Spouses Orientation Course,

established a command wide Squadron Superintendent Course, hosted a command wide Enlisted Force Development Workshop and led three Striker Stripe seminars. All of these events were designed to educate Airmen in the profession of arms and prepare Striker Airmen for positions of increased responsibility within the nuclear enterprise.

As the cliché goes, history will determine my legacy, but during my tenure my focus was on making tangible improvements to enlisted programs and processes designed to improve the combat readiness and professional development for the command's 31,000 Airmen.



Chief Williams with Tuskegee Airmen Brig. Gen. Charles McGee and his son.





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CHIEF MASTER SERGEANT

**CHARLES HOFFMAN**



*"Make where  
you are the  
best place you  
or anyone  
else can be."*



## What are your thoughts on the Air Force of today?

There is a lot to be said about meeting Airmen where they are to get them to where they want and need to be. I believe that most Airmen join to belong to something challenging and to be a part of something bigger than themselves. In fact, my fondest memories (and memories and stories shared by other Airmen) are those that surround being deployed on missions. Whether to save lives in Bosnia or deter adversaries in Iraq, China and Russia.

In the macro, I hope the institutional Air Force remembers that. They joined to join us and meet OUR

standards, they didn't join to have the military join them. When we continually join them, we create a sense of entitlement, which is at odds with the service, sacrifice and values necessary to defend the country. We keep Airmen by being fair, providing unique opportunities, and supporting them and their families.

As far as technology is concerned, we have needed to INVEST in our technical infrastructure for a long time. Along with that investment, I hope we invest in the skills necessary to exploit the new technology. As a solid and simple example, my personal greatest leap of capability using Excel was in my masters degree program. I had no CLUE what Excel could do and I had been "using" it for 20 years.

## What words of advice can you share for those experiencing or feeling challenged by changes?

Stay true to who you are, work hard every day, focus on those things that you can change and those people and missions that are in your locus of control, and care deeply about those things. The rest is noise, assumption, conjecture, opinion and out of your control...so why care? Make where you are the best place you or anyone else can be.

## What was the biggest challenge during your time in leadership and how did you overcome?

Looking back, I think there were two challenges. The challenge of strengthening the AFGSC culture for future needs and making it through the COVID-19



Chief Hoffman meets with Airmen in their work center during a base visit to the 377th Air Base Wing to learn more about them and their mission.



pandemic while making our deterrence capability better. Then trying to do those both simultaneously!

We overcame those challenges by trusting the team to lead their Airmen through direct and continuous contact. By understanding the needs of Airmen (food, shelter, mental health) and having a team that executed outstandingly, we ended up accepting first-term Airmen out of basic military training at the highest rate in the Air Force and gave them a first home and duties when other commands couldn't take any more. We ensured cost-free food and high-speed internet across the missile fields and on and on. Wing and numbered Air Force leadership could not have done better and the MAJCOM staff was all over it in a synchronized juggernaut. We revolutionized Bomber Task Force deployments and helped shape how that pace would be maintained. We made decisions asking tough questions about the new virus and maximized Airman decision space and freedom while meeting or exceeding mission requirements. We communicated that which we did and did not know. I think that went a long way with Airmen and Families to make the sacrifices necessary to also complete the mission.

The same challenge was true with resetting and changing AFGSC culture. Culture is probably the toughest problem set to tackle which is why it is often the most neglected. However, culture eats strategy for lunch. Our effort was leader focused and probably didn't trickle as best as it could have, but change is hard! When you are teaching AFGSC leaders that measurement of their success isn't only the number of sorties launched, but their first-term Airman retention rate...that is HARD. It is HARD to start

getting over just producing and leading, but that was our challenge. How do you sponsor, on and off-board Airmen? What's their quality of life? How are they really being led to be better?

Culture is a 7-10 year adventure, but I'm glad we put so much effort in making a course correction and am confident that the effort will continue and make Strikers better. Future Striker missions will be about agility, independent and critical thinking, as well as innovative solutions to tough tactical and operational challenges that affect strategic outcomes for the nation.

## **What drives you when faced with obstacles and challenges, professionally or personally?**

I think what drives me is solving challenges that I really internally believe need to be solved. I've got to be bought in. I've been around a long time and spoken with many a snake oil salesman, and I've lost patience with those folks. If its change for change sake or we are all sitting around talking about a problem that the organization really doesn't want to solve (by the way, any problem can be solved if we want to...where there's a will there's a way) I hate that WITH A PASSION. If it is important for Airmen and winning the next war AND we are going to fix it come hell or high water, by God count me and my team in!



Chief Hoffman suited up in a bomb suit at Kirtland Air Force Base, N.M., during a visit with Airmen across the 377th ABW.





## **What singular experience or individual impacted you the most during your service and why or how?**

I think my deployment to Bosnia as a Senior Airman was an impactful moment. There we were, (we weren't all prepped like we are now in the Air Force) deployed with the Army with live rounds occasionally flying overhead. I'm in a helmet carrying a weapon with a live round in the chamber and 240 more rounds in case I needed them. It was a small team delivering weather intelligence for the operation. MAN...that was awesome! It was band of brothers/sisters sacrificing and succeeding together. I learned a lot about being self-reliant, the importance of training and the need to be an expert at what the Air Force trained me to be. I think that's why I always preached and taught those principles. In the next fight, like my Wingman General Timothy Ray used to say, "we're not going to need a computer or a piece of equipment to win...its going to be a no kidding, expert 7-level (fill in your blank) that will be the difference between success and failure."

For me that meant, taking 60 to 90 days at the front end of every new role learning, listening, collaborating and thinking to distill things to a strategic set of three to five of the most important issues to tackle that would move the Wing, NAF, and MAJCOM in the direction it needed to go. I think if done right, the unit moves in the right direction, the mission and training get done and your fellow Airmen see you like they would a duck swimming across a pond. What they see is a bird calmly moving along the



Chief Hoffman coins Senior Airman Norman Parks, 377th Mission Support Group Explosive Ordnance Disposal technician at Kirtland Air Force Base,.

surface of the water, but what they don't see is the furious paddling beneath the surface to be successful for all of their Airmen and their mission.

## **What is the difference in leadership considerations needed at the Command Chief level that you would want Airmen to understand?**

This is a great question. I think I'd like them to know that as the Command Chief, your leadership efforts move from 100% tactical, on the ground with individual Airmen to 10% tactical and 90% strategic leadership effort. You must now apply all that you have learned along your leadership journey, combine experience and knowledge with a great deal of research, analysis, continual learning and understanding of a larger enterprise of people and mission sets. Focus goes from leading yourself and a few in a narrow scope to leading many across a wide-spectrum of operations and experience. That means understanding the language, culture, mission, training and people within multiple career fields, civilians, con-





tractors, Airmen, non-commissioned officers, senior non-commissioned officers, Company Grade officers, Field Grade Officers, General officers, not to mention Guard and Reserve along with higher headquarters staffs at numbered Air Force, Major Command and Headquarters Air Force levels.

## What were your greatest strengths and weaknesses as a leader during that time?

I think my greatest strengths are the ability to strategically think and connect dots from smaller data sets to the big picture, limit workload (especially for others) to things that really need to get going, and working with teams to solve problems that are really problems that the organization really wants to solve, strength of character and a spine, and the ability to learn things quickly and help others learn as well.



Chief Hoffman and family.

Weaknesses would include sometimes trusting others will eventually do the right thing, not being direct enough, and not spending enough time on the sales and marketing of new ideas. Selling the idea is almost more important than the idea. I would also add trust your teammates, but ensure they have the fill vision and scope of what is expected. If you spend the time to do this, you will find success.

## Do you feel there were sacrifices made to achieve your career goals? How?

I think we make sacrifices any time we make a decision. When we decide, we are choosing a path over other paths. So yes, there were sacrifices of time, family and self.

I did my best to limit the sacrifices to pursue what I felt was a calling (I never felt like I was “working”) to my time, family, and self. I became better at prioritization at work over my career to limit the sacrifice felt, resulting in greater satisfaction and work-life balance.



Chief Hoffman listens to the thoughts of Airmen during breakfast at F.E. Warren Air Force Base, Wyo. Hoffman visited many shops around base and took a look at some of the Airmen dormitories during his visit.



What I learned that will carry the day for you is do only those things that you can do, delegate everything else (that means you have to develop those around you and let go of control) and communicate with family and others and when you or your family have had enough, call it quits. In the end, I think the sacrifices we made were worth it for us.

## **Can you describe a time in life where you pursued a goal, failed, but got back up and succeeded?**

My first semester in college I wound up with a 0.24 GPA. I was the first in the family to go to college and took too much, too fast. I became overwhelmed and frankly gave up and decided to just have a good time instead. I was on a full scholarship, so I lost that. I worked full time after that and went to community college and took a couple of classes at a time. I was an A student. The problem wasn't aptitude.

Lesson: Do some learning about big life steps so you make the best decisions you can. I just went to college and signed up for classes (big mistake) AND you will always take things you earn more seriously than things you are given. When I was PAYING for school, my course selection got better and my study habits were way better. I wound up enlisting in the Air Force, earned my Community College of the Air Force, Bachelor of Science and Master of Arts degrees and did pretty well.

## **What legacy do you believe you left or hoped you have left on AFGSC?**

My only hope is that I left the command in a better position to acquire the tools necessary to provide the strategic deterrence required for the next 30 years.

I hope that when Airmen look back at the time I was in the seat with General Ray, they see that we made great effort to make their life a little better and the command more lethal.

The only legacy I ever wanted to leave was helping the Airmen around me so they got what they needed, and that our Airmen were ready to answer the nation's call, no matter what.

To me, that's the legacy to leave.



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CHIEF MASTER SERGEANT

**SHELLEY COHEN**

*"Be true to  
who you are.  
Be willing to  
facilitate  
change."*





## What are your thoughts on the Air Force of today?

As you make it through the ranks, it becomes obvious the generational gap grows at a rapid rate. The communication 'burden' squarely falls on the senior member. It isn't an easy task to try to reach a generation younger than you, but it is imperative you work on filling that gap.

## What words of advice can you share for those experiencing or feeling challenged by these changes?

Reflect on your thoughts or feelings during those times in your life. The 'language' may be slightly different between generations, but the life challenges are the same. I think it's important we share our personal challenges with the Airmen. They look at leadership like we have gotten to our positions without stumbling along the way, which is incorrect. I don't know of anyone who hasn't had to pick themselves up and keep forging ahead. At our core, we are all flawed human beings, and that's ok.

## What has been the biggest challenge during your time in leadership and how did you overcome?

Often being the first female in many of the leadership positions I held, I was so hard on myself. I worked longer hours than my male counterparts, never said 'no' when someone asked if I could take on a task, though my plate was so full I couldn't fit another thing on it, and felt if I didn't have the answer right away I was failing. I had to learn to give



Chief Cohen joins fellow senior enlisted leaders in congratulating Senior Airman Tyler Lewellen, center left, an aerospace ground equipment technician from Detachment 4 upon his special recognition as the distinguished graduate and academic achievement award recipient during an Airmen Leadership School graduation.

myself grace and be ok with not being perfect at everything. That's not easy to do when you are your own worst critic. It took self reflection, lots of reading, and learning that it's ok to take time to take care of me. We are no good to anyone without putting the mask on yourself first once in a while.

## What drives you when faced with obstacles and challenges, professionally or personally?

From the moment I entered the Air Force until the day I retired my focus was to just be the best Airmen I could for that day. Some days I was more successful than others, but that is life. The beauty is, there is another day ahead of you to give it your all again.

## What singular experience or individual impacted you the most during your





## service and why or how?

When I was a SrA, I was injured in the bombing of Khobar Towers. It was a time in our Air Force when mental health assistance was frowned upon and none was offered outright to anyone impacted.

I had to seek professional assistance outside of the Air Force for fear of losing my job or being branded as 'less than' for needing to have someone to talk to. While internalizing my trauma and trying hard every day to make sure it did not reflect negatively on my career, I had a MSgt ask if "that was a Purple Heart ribbon I was wearing?" When I responded, "yes", his reply was to ask if I had gotten it by "breaking a fingernail".

I don't remember his name or even what he looked like, but his words ring in my ears, 26 years later. Though he later apologized, the lasting damage was done. I vowed at that moment to never minimize what someone was going through, especially if I was unable to relate to their struggles.

## What is the difference in the leadership considerations needed at the Command Chief level that you would want Airmen to understand?

As you are coming up through the ranks and taking on roles within your organization, it is easy to focus on the job you have mastered and those around you that you know. Once you become a Command Chief, that circle widens into area outside of your comfort zone. Your focus is now across the wing, into career fields you have little to no knowledge and a vastly

larger group of Airmen. Decisions have to be made for the greater good of the Wing to ensure the mission stays on track.

## What were your greatest strengths and weaknesses as a leader during that time?

Do the right thing because it's the right thing to do....it sounds so simple. I live by that mantra. I have never let peer relationships or higher rank intimidate or alter my perception of what the right decision is as the rules/regulations dictate. If you do the right thing, make sound decisions based upon the information you have in front of you, be willing to make tough calls when necessary, and treat people fairly, you don't need to worry about getting into trouble.

I would say my weakness is listed above in regards to taking too long to take care of myself and knowing when to take knee and more importantly.....give yourself grace.



Chief Cohen congratulates Staff Sgt. Belinda Thoreson, 707th Maintenance Squadron aircraft mechanic, for winning the 307th Bomb Wing Noncommissioned Officer for the third quarter of 2017 during a commander's call on Barksdale Air Force Base, La..



## **Do you feel there have been sacrifices made to achieve your career goals? How?**

There are always sacrifices, no matter what level you are at in your career. I was a single parent until I reached Technical Sergeant, so there was a lot of juggling just daily tasks (Wing exercises, long work days, etc) and that's before you throw deployments into the mix. It's not only Airmen who are resilient, it's our family members. Our children who do without mom and/or dad for long periods of time, our spouses/significant others who pick up the slack for your absence, our parents who try to help out, often from long distances, neighbors who pitch in to lend a hand....everyone sacrifices. However, I never really looked at any of my sacrifices as ones for my 'career', but for my country. I never doubted it was the right thing to do.

## **What legacy do you believe you left or hope TO LEAVE on AFGSC?**

I hope I was impactful to AFGSC from a TFI perspective. Though I had many years of active duty before joining the Reserve, I took great care to make sure all of our Airmen were heard, regardless of what status they were in. I fully understand the challenges of both active and reserve statuses and strived to bridge any gaps. Neither component can get to mission accomplishment without the other.

## **Are there any additional words of advice you would like to provide?**

Closing thoughts are: Be true to who you are. Be



Chief Cohen with her husband CMSgt Pete Cohen.

willing to facilitate change. But you have to keep in mind, that change may need to happen within yourself and not always your surroundings. Once you are part of this great Air Force, you are truly a part of something so much bigger than yourself...we have to learn to work together to celebrate our unique differences and use those to make the force stronger. Anything less is going to weaken us.

I am proud to have served the United States in the capacity of being an Airman and though I no longer physically put the uniform on every day, I wear it in my heart and soul. I am confident in our future Airmen's ability to ensure we remain the world's best Air Force.





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CHIEF MASTER SERGEANT

**ANDREW SIMANSKI**

*"Figure out  
how to  
get to  
YES!"*





## What are your thoughts on the Air Force of today ?

I was in a discussion recently with senior leaders on the topic of social media. The gist of the conversation was “why do Airmen turn to social media instead of their chain of command to (fill in the blank)?” This question was asked philosophically, and the senior leaders at the table were challenged to bring back ideas over the next few weeks. In my opinion, this conversation sums up the state of the Air Force today when it comes to culture, generational gaps, and what we can and cannot do as senior leaders.

During the discussion, many leaders offered solutions. Things that worked at previous bases or assignments and other ideas on how to get our Airmen to build trust in the chain of command versus going to social media to solve problems or complain.



Chief Simanski during a B-52 flight with the 307th Bomb Wing .

Most, if not all, of the initial thoughts were all technology based solutions.

After the discussion, I looked at my phone and wondered why I don’t use all the cool apps the Air Force has rolled out over the last few years to help “connect”, the Air Force Connect app being the primary one, anymore? When I thought about it, I realized the app is not the problem. The problem, at least for me, is that I’m spending way too much time dealing with a myriad of minor “big Air Force” problems (e.g. travel vouchers not being processed in a timely manner, Internet Explorer being phased out when our admin functions only work with IE, dealing with a less than optimized IT network) that my big Air Force chain of command has not solved for us. I wonder how many Airmen are in the same situation.

One answer I’d offer back to our senior leaders on the social media question and reflects my thoughts on Air Force culture and technology today, is that we need to do a much better job taking care of the little things than worrying about rolling out the next cool app, program or initiative. Until we do a better job on the addressing basic day-to-day issues, which leads to Airmen frustration and not trusting the chain of command, it doesn’t matter how many slick apps we give our Airmen or all the ways we attempts to communicate to our Airmen,. It will always be easier for younger Airmen to attempt to solve problems or elevate complaints via social media.

It was only recently, and after lots of not so positive discussion on social media as the topic that the Air





Force Reserve command leadership began addressing the issue of the travel voucher backlog. The answer was not satisfactory, but at least we now know they are trying to fix the problem.

To close this question out I'd say this. The Airmen today are smarter, more tech savvy, and much more reliant on their tech than we ever were. However, no matter how much they love the Air Force, if we as leaders do not take care of the little things, trust in the chain of command will never be built and our Airmen will substitute social media for their chain of command and will also leave the Air Force sooner out of frustration.

## **What words of advice can you share for those experiencing or feeling challenged by these changes?**

Two answers, one to leaders and one to the Airmen we lead. As leaders, we need to communicate, communicate, communicate. We need to be in the social media arena with a credible voice. When problems arise, to the extent possible, let as many people know we are aware of the issue and we are doing our best to address. Constant and accurate communication on little things will build the trust needed to have credibility on the bigger issues when they arise.

For example, a simple notice addressing the current IE shortfall, what is being done to mitigate hardships, and the vision for the long-term solution would go a long way to building trust that leadership is trying to address the situation. Yet we don't, and the

Airmen turn to social media to lampoon why the most lethal Air Force the world has such major information technology issues.

To the Airmen we lead, realize that when an event or crisis is unfolding, the information being put out is always going to change as more facts are learned. Realize that enterprise solutions take time, and are not always easy to implement, especially down to a squadron level. Most everyone will give us the benefit of the doubt if we are doing our best to communicate.



Chief Simanski at the 2021 Air Force Association meeting with associated AFGSC, 20th AF, 8th AF, and associate wing Command Chiefs.

## **What was the biggest challenge during your time in leadership and how did you overcome?**

My first day on at 8th AF was 20 April 2020, which was right at the beginning of the global COVID



Chief Simanski and Chief Smith with fellow AFGSC chief master sergeants during an office call with Chief Master Sgt. of the Air Force JoAnne S. Bass.

-19 pandemic. By the time I moved up to AFGSC in 2021, we were still in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, but dealing with a multitude of pandemic-related challenges.

One of the biggest challenges dealing with the avalanche of information being proliferated by government officials, the Department of Defense, the Air Force, media, all of which was being amplified by social media. As we all remember, there was not a consistent set of facts on any aspect of the pandemic, and when we started discharging military members for non-compliance of policy, the divides only deepened.

One thing about Reservists, and specifically Individual Mobilization Augmentees, when not on duty many do not have access to official e-mail or routinely check webmail. As such, we developed a COVID-19

communication strategy that included critical mission compliance data, updated COVID policies and readiness information that provided vital information to 192 Individual Mobilization Augmentees across two Numbered Air Forces, the nation's three intercontinental ballistic missile wings, the Air Force's seven bomber wings, and other operational and maintenance support organizations. Although difficult in the beginning, we were able to maintain 100% compliance and accountability with higher headquarters reporting requirements during the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic.

## **What drives you when faced with obstacles and challenges, professionally or personally?**

Most people that know me know that I am an avid runner. What they may not know is how running has underpinned the success I've had in my career. I was



never a real runner until I joined the Air Force. After joining the Air Force, the 1.5 mile run became part of my life. Soon after, 1.5 mile runs became 5ks, then 10ks, then half marathons, then running full marathons. I've since retired from running full marathons, but running remains a constant in my life today. Yes, continually passing the Air Force PT test is important, so are the health benefits from running.

More important, running provides me a daily opportunity to acutely focus on problem solving, mission planning, or just completely escape from a stressful day.

While running, I've written speeches, solved difficult problems, and have had many "brilliant" ideas pop into my head.

Running not only contributes to my physical health, it strengthens my mental and spiritual health, which are also key components to facing both professional and personal challenges and obstacles. I know not everyone likes or wants to be alone with their thoughts, but for me, it underpins everything about me.

I've had the following quote hanging in my office for over 25 years titled: The Essence of Running.



Chief Simanski during a run.

"Running is the road to self-awareness and self-reliance...you can push yourself to the extreme and learn the harsh reality of your physical and mental limitations or coast quietly down a solitary path watching the earth spin beneath your feet, but when you are through, exhilarated and exhausted, at least for a moment everything seems right with the world."

## **What singular experience or individual impacted you the most during your service and why or how?**

During an initial feedback session with a senior leader I asked what would success look like for the position he just hired me into. He told me to focus on one part of the job that I was most passionate about, and let your tenure be defined by your expertise and passion for executing that component of the mission.

Needless to say, he expected me to execute other parts of the mission as well, but I was not expected to execute 100% on every aspect of the mission. This may seem counterintuitive to the way we have been raised in the Air Force, but here's the point. We will never be able to do 100% of jobs and missions we are assigned, especially in this age of "doing more with less".

Focus on the really important components of your job that you are most passionate about, and do them extraordinarily well. As you execute your primary part of your job, you'll find the time and





energy to tackle the second tier tasks of your job too. Then the question becomes what about those things left on your “to do” list? Be honest with yourself on whether or not they need to be done. Is it more important to stay a work an extra few hours to get something done, or to go home at a reasonable hour, make time to exercise, and have dinner with the family? My belief is the Air Force will be better off because you exercised, spent time with family, and got a good night sleep versus working extra hours to get some meaningless task done. I wish I learned these lessons earlier in my career.

## **What is the difference in the leadership considerations needed at the Command Chief level that you would want Airmen to understand?**

In early 2022, the Air Force unveils action plan to ‘Develop tomorrow’s enlisted Airmen’. Lots of lofty goals, including the goal to complete 28 force development objectives in two years, but the end state goal is how to better focus on investing and empowering Airmen for the future fight. The secret is that Air Force has always developed leaders, not always deliberately, and not always following a set plan. And what we value as an Air Force has changed over time.

As I reflect back over more than 36 years of Air Force service, I’m trying to think about what the Air Force did to invest and empower us to be ready for the future fight? In other words, how does one go from an Air Force “Buck” sergeant to the AFGSC Individual Mobilization Augmentee to the Command Chief ?



Chief Simanski with Chief Smith and other AFGSC chief master sergeants at the AFGSC Commander's Conference at F.E. Warren AFB.

The first obvious point is not every Airman wants to be a Chief, not every Chief aspires to become a Command Chief, and even if they do, it is a very small percentage of a very small percentage that will become Command Chief.

The second obvious point is that a Command Chief has been deliberately developed over their career, and by the time they make it to the Command Chief level, they should have a good number of tools in their tool box to make them successful. We’ve all had someone tap us on the shoulder telling us that we should consider certain assignments that would be good for our career.

I’d want Airmen to understand when your leadership is pointing you in a certain direction, take note and listen. You may not see the bigger picture, but your leadership is often seeing your potential, and pushing you in a direction that will lead to your future success.

I’ll channel a few answers I’ve given in these





memoirs and share a very valuable lesson I learned much later in my career, but led me down a very different path on my career. I was at the eight year mark of my active duty career when my Command Chief and career field functional called me in a told me I had been selected to be an instructor at the intel school house.

Back in those days, there wasn't a "deliberate development" process; it was more the wisdom of the Command Chiefs and functionals doing what they thought was right. Back then I was a little more stubborn, and really didn't like being told what to do. I probably would have been a little more open to the idea had there been more discussions with me. I decided to decline the assignment and separate from active duty. Luckily, another Chief tapped me on the shoulder and told me I should consider becoming a Reservist. I'm glad I listened to that Chief.

What I didn't know at the time was in my intel career field, which only numbers about 300, the path to becoming a Chief was going to the intel school house, teaching the next generation of intel professionals, building out your network, and as you were promoted, the Airmen you taught would be your network of technical and master sergeants that would be working for you in key positions.

It was years later before I realized what my Command Chief and functional were trying to do for me as a young staff sergeant. That's the point I'd like to leave this question. At all levels of being a Chief, including being a Command Chief, we are always

thinking about talent management, deliberate development, and pushing the right talent forward. We don't always do it right, we may not always correctly explain our intentions, we may fail to articulate a good long range vision and have a number other competing priorities on our plates. But what I'd like Airmen at any level to take away is that our number one priority is taking care of our Airmen, taking care of the boss, and trying to make the absolute best decisions for our Air Force!

## **What were your greatest strengths and weaknesses as a leader during that time?**

One of the greatest strengths during my tenure at 8th AF and AFGSC was developing enduring relationships with leaders from both organizations, but especially with the 8th AF and AFGSC Mobilization Augmentees and Air National Guard MAs. There were times at both units when the MAs and IMAs were sitting in the leadership chairs while the active duty leadership were not on station.

## **Do you feel there were sacrifices made to achieve your career goals? How?**

So there I was late 2020 getting ready to retire from the Air Force after 33 years of active and reserve service. I had just retired from government civilian service, and began working a dream job as a senior intelligence analyst at the Defense Advanced Research Project Agency in Arlington, Virginia. Then I had a conversation with CMSgt Tim White, the current Air Force Reserve Command, Command Chief, about a



Chief Simanski at Gen Robin Rand's Order of the Sword ceremony.

fantastic opportunity as the IMA to the 8th AF Command Chief. Tim told me this assignment was very important to AFRC for a number of reasons including the Total Force Integration environment that existed at Barksdale AFB,

the TFI wings under

8th AF, and to put the right TFI ambassador to support the sitting 8th AF Command Chief, CMSgt Melvina Smith. Of course, I accepted the assignment.

I'm not saying my assignments at 8th AF and AFGSC were sacrifices, but I will say there a lot of sacrifices we as reservists make just to continue to serve. First, we are only paid the equivalent of "one weekend a month, and two weeks a year" or for about 27 days of service. Most reservists serve those days many time over, a lot of time without pay. There are other ways to serve in a paid status, but those come with a huge administrative effort to successfully execute. And guess who is responsible for navigating the administrative burdens...the IMA reservist. As I've already mentioned, it is currently taking over three months to get our vouchers processed by the Air Force Reserve Command. While waiting, we either have our GCC suspended or pay them off with personal funds. Guess what I do when I take vacation from my civilian job? Usually I go to perform military duty. This list just scratches the surface of the

sacrifices we reservists make just to serve. The question I always ask myself, are the sacrifices worth it to serve? The answer is always absolutely yes!!!

## **What legacy do you believe you left or hoped you have left on AFGSC?**

It wasn't long into 2021 when Chief Smith was named as Command Chief, Air Force Global Strike Command, and in late 2021 she hired me for a second time as her IMA at AFGSC. I'll always remember the personal call I got from Gen. Anthony Cotton welcoming me to the AFGSC family!!!

Having worked for approximately a year and a half for Melvina at 8th AF, I now had another year and a half to continue working the projects and priorities we had previously established. Reflecting back, here are a few of the things we were able to accomplish.

- Played a critical role in the deliberate development and enrichment of over 12K Airmen by successfully executing numerous professional development courses, events, and ceremonies encompassing the entire Air Force Global Strike Command enterprise. These events included the Mighty Eight Dominance courses, Command Chief off-sites, and two Order of the Sword ceremonies.
- As the senior Command Chief Individual Mobilization Augmentee in the Air Force Reserve Command, championed enterprise-level changes to travel policy implemented by the Air Force Reserve Command Senior Enlisted Council.



- Led an AFRC-level Individual Mobilization Augmentee professional development network that helped to deliberately develop and prepare 20 first-time Command Chief Individual Mobilization Augmentees for key strategic leadership positions.

As to the first bullet, only time will tell if we had an impact on the Airmen of the AFGSC enterprise. Nothing brings me more joy than when I meet up with an Airman from my past and they thank me for something random I did for them. Most of the time I'll recognize the Airman, but not always, but nine out of 10 times I will vaguely remember the act. We never know how we are going to impact the Airmen in our lives. Hopefully most impacts are positive!!!

As to the second bullet, in 2019, the Air Force Reserve Command formally established the Individual Mobilization Augmentee (IMA) to Command Chief Master Sergeant Air Force Specialty Code. Since then, there have been only four IMA to Command Chiefs that have served at the 4-star level, the first of which was my predecessor CMSgt Shelly Cohen! Currently there are only 12 IMA to Command Chiefs serving Air Force wide serving at 2-star levels or above.

I did a lot of work behind the scenes helping to formalize the IMA to CCC program and establish our 9E200 AFSC. The barrier for entry to the 9E200 AFSC includes being qualified to serve as a Command Chief Master Sergeant, per AFI 36-2109 CCM

Selection Process, be a graduated Chief Master Sergeant, or a current/former Individual Mobilization Augmentee to a Command Chief Master Sergeant serving in positions above wing level.

A nice legacy for me would be a steady stream of graduated CCMs willing to serve as IMAs to CCCs, and since there is no limitation of the numbers of IMAs to CCCs, that more Chiefs are willing to serve in key strategic leadership positions.



Chief Smith and Chief Simanski at Gen Robin Rand's Order of the Sword ceremony

## **Can you describe a time in life where you pursued a goal, failed, but got back up and succeeded?**

There are too many things that I've failed at over the years but got back up and succeeded to list, and no one epic failure comes to mind. I'd like to focus on how I deal with failures, obstacles, and career set back. My philosophy has always been "never take no as the final answer".



I can go back to before I joined the Air Force. My initial discussions with an Air Force recruiter was about me wanting to be an air traffic controller. I was very determined that was the only thing I wanted to do in the Air Force, but the recruiter told me no. Disappointed, but not deterred, I enlisted anyways. Things seemed to have worked out.

I've found over the years, it is much easier for people to tell you no versus trying to figure out how to get to yes. As an Individual Mobilization Augmentee for nearly 27 years, with emphasis on the word individual, I've had to be my own A1 technician, travel voucher specialist, assignment officer, promotion board member, protocol expert and a number of other job titles because someone told me no, and I had to figure out how to help them get to yes.

Indeed, it is a lot of work, but the only one that is going to look out for your career and cares about your career is you!

## **Anything else to add?**

As my tenure as Individual Mobilization Augmentee to the Command Chief Master Sergeant, Headquarters Eighth Air Force (Air Forces Strategic), and then as Individual Mobilization Augmentee to the Command Chief Master Sergeant, Air Force Global Strike Command draws to an end, I can honestly say these last three years have been the most rewarding years of my entire Air Force career.

There are not enough adjectives in my vocabulary to say everything I'd like to about the Airmen of striker nation, and the leadership teams at both 8th AF and AFGSC.

That is not the main take away. What I'd like future leaders, especially TFI Chiefs considering assignments anywhere in the striker nation enterprise, to take away is that leaders will come and go but the foundation and culture the leaders in this memoir have built is second to none in the Air Force, and the future of Air Force Global Strike Command, especially with B-21 and Sentinel weapon systems coming on-line, will ensure AFGSC continues to be the most lethal fighting force the world has ever known!





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CHIEF MASTER SERGEANT

# MELVINA SMITH

*"We have a global  
impact and are always  
ready to provide  
unmatched Airpower  
for our nation  
and our Allies.*

*We are  
Striker  
Strong!"*





## What are your thoughts on the Air Force of today?

I think that we are steeped in talent. Our Airmen are poised, innovative, intellectual and capable of taking full advantage of technologies and information systems available today and employ them in a way that makes us more efficient and lethal.



Chief Smith and Gen. Anthony Cotton with Recipients of Air Force Global Strike Command's Outstanding Airmen of the Year awards. Six AFGSC Airmen were selected for this prestigious award on the basis of merit, job performance, superior leadership and personal achievements.

## What words of advice can you share for those experiencing or feeling challenged by changes?

Resources and training are available to equip them to be the force multiplier our nation needs today and to look at those challenges as opportunities that will allow us to continue to be the premier Air Force in the world.

## What has been the biggest challenge during your time in leadership and how did you overcome?

The COVID-19 pandemic. We overcame it in several ways. By being flexible and adaptable, by assessing and adapting to protocol and practices that allowed

us to operate at an optimum level, as well as focusing on innovative ideas, building on our strengths, and capitalizing on diverse perspectives and ideas to generate new ways of doing business.

By taking full advantage of all facets of operations, while keeping in mind our most precious resources are our people, and focusing on people and families we have been able to not only overcome but thrive. We were also able to succeed by not only considering our operational practices but collaborating with those of our Allies and partners.



Chief Smith with Gen. Anthony Cotton and other AFGSC senior leaders.





## What drives you when faced with obstacles and challenges, professionally or personally?

From a professional standpoint what drives me is my understanding of the big picture and knowing who came before me. It's also understanding the realization of the heritage I'm now a part of and the respect for the legacy of those who came before me. I believe in paying it forward. That's where my drive come from. I have a determination to leave things better. The creed states "we are faithful to a proud heritage" and those aren't just words to me. It means so much more.

From a personal standpoint, it's remembering my why: my family. They're giants in their own right.

People who have sacrificed for me, some of whom paid the ultimate sacrifice, and my goal is making them proud and paying tribute to their lives.



Chief Smith with her husband Derek (L), Mrs. Bussiere and current AFGSC Commander Gen. Thomas Bussiere.



Chief Smith with her family.

## What singular experience or individual impacted you the most during your service and why or how?

It's hard to narrow it down to a singular experience. I've come across several crossroads in my career, to include separations, deployments and losing teammates.

Throughout my career I've been fortunate to have great leaders, mentors, bosses and coworkers to provide guidance and encouragement and confirm my sense of direction, but when I look back the one constant has been my best friend, my best half, my partner for life...my husband Derek. He's been there for every victory and every challenge.





Chief Smith with Gen. Anthony Cotton and members of AFGSC.

## **What is the difference in the leadership considerations needed at the Command Chief level that you would want Airmen to understand?**

I believe good leadership transcends throughout all levels. The true and honest foundation of leadership is to consider the effects it will have not only on the mission, but most importantly, the people performing the mission. This is the greatest consideration.

## **What are your greatest strengths and weaknesses as a leader?**

My greatest strengths are how I connect with people, realizing self-care is not selfish, fighting for feedback, fostering an inclusive environment and creating a culture where leaders can grow and be the best versions of themselves.

My greatest weaknesses are spreading myself too thin and being so focused on the destination that I didn't enjoy the journey. I've learned to be a person

of reflection and the value in making time for quiet time and being present in the moment.

## **Do you feel there have been sacrifices made to achieve your career goals? How?**

Absolutely. There have been tremendous sacrifices.



Chief Smith at the Low Observable Restoration Facility Groundbreaking ceremony with AFGSC Honorary Command Chief Mrs. Lynn Kendall and enlisted members of the 28th Bomb Wing.



Gen. Timothy Ray and Chief Smith at his Order of the Sword ceremony.

Looking back it's worth it. The good definitely outweighs the bad. There's been sacrifices: my health, time, relationships, missed milestones and significant events and moments I can't get back. I've lost friends, loved ones, teammates and they are remembered and a part of my Air Force story. Above all, I believe the sacrifices my family has made outweigh mine. I'm grateful for them and their continued support. They love this Air Force as much as I do. They serve in their own right as well.

## Can you describe a time in life where you pursued a goal, failed, but got back up and succeeded?

Absolutely. I recall wanting to make Senior Airman Below the Zone and coming up short. I learned promotion is a byproduct of taking care of people.

Despite not making BTZ, I went on to have a successful career. I used that moment as a form of motivation and it's been a driving factor in me.

## What legacy do you believe you left or hope TO LEAVE on AFGSC?

I'm still serving, but I hope to leave a legacy of honor, respect and inclusivity where everyone's perspective is appreciated and sought after. Where individuals can lead boldly and where all team members are valuable and contribute in their own unique way to striker culture.

## Final thoughts from the current Air Force Global Strike Command Chief

I've been blessed to work with three dynamic leaders: Gens. Tim Ray, Anthony Cotton, and now Gen. Thomas Bussiere. As they took the torch, they gained momentum always focused on the human capital and rightly so. Striker culture has and will continue to benefit from these giants. I've been honored to be their Wingman. It's been a highlight of my career.

I would like to close this historic collection of experience with my own leadership take aways for our future Strikers I am excited to see become leaders in our great Air Force...



Gen. Thomas Bussiere, Air Force Global Strike Command commander and Chief Smith.





Don't focus on the highs or lows ...  
stay grounded

Don't let a title, position or rank define you.  
Your worth is much greater  
and will transcend beyond all of those

Don't forget your WHY;  
WHY you joined, and most importantly  
WHY you stayed

You have to look in the mirror and be proud  
of the leader looking back at you

Leaders are learners, continue to pursue  
academics and your interest

Ensure there is diversity across all  
spectrums around the table, diversity of  
background, thought, and much more to  
reach new heights

To gain influence, you must give it away

Be lifelong learners, exercise the most  
powerful weapon you have - your mind





Look for opportunities to communicate  
and demonstrate your team member full  
potential

Deliberate development coupled with self  
development is the recipe for success, so  
continue to invest in yourself  
personally and professionally

Harmony is achievable...don't be afraid to  
stop and re-prioritize as needed

Integrity is the core of what we do

Excellence doesn't mean perfection; it  
means putting your best foot forward

Your next move is your best move!

It's not just about relationships,  
it's all about relationships

Take time for faith, family, fitness rest and  
to critically think

