Interview

with

CMSgt Brian R. Stafford,

Command Chief

Air Force Test Center

Edwards AFB, California

14 October 2020

At

1100L

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BRIAN R. STAFFORD, CMSgt, USAF
Center Command Chief

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Murphy: My name is John Murphy. I'm the Air Force Test Center historian. This is an interview with Chief Master Sergeant Brian R. Stafford. It is 14 October 2020, at 1100. Can you describe some of your assignments before becoming Air Force Test Center command chief?

Stafford: I originally entered the Air Force in October of 1994, and I originally was an F-15 crew chief stationed out at Tyndall Air Force Base [Florida]. So I kind of developed a -- kind of further expand my love and passion for aviation doing that job. After about 3 years, I had an opportunity to cross-train into the command and control operations group billet, which is like command posts, command centers for the Air Force. I've had a variety of different assignments, , from the wing level, Numbered Air Force, MAJCOM, [Major Command] and even some positions that fall under the Joint Staff line on the National Airborne Operations Center. So I think that kind of helped broaden my perspective as to what -- everything that the Air Force entails. And then further increased, , as time kind of developed --, through your different assignments you develop not only a passion for the typical job and technical expertise that you have, but then taking care of airmen and our families and that sort of thing. So from there, I had an opportunity to go and work as a group superintendent, also back at Tyndall Air Force Base, about 20 years later. So that was pretty interesting. But then transitioning into a different role of having opportunity as a command chief, I was selected to go and work as the chief for General Goldfein's [David, L., USAF Chief of Staff] multi-domain command and control focus area. I did that from basically December of 2016 until May of 2018, having been hired as a command chief at that time to go serve at Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson up in Alaska, where I worked for the same commander that I had as my group superintendent.

Murphy: Oh, nice.

Stafford: So, yeah, so that was pretty interesting. And then after a successful tour there, had an opportunity and was hired by Maj Gen Azzano [Christopher, P., Air Force Test Center Commander] to come and be the command chief for the Test Center. So that's what brings me here.

Murphy: Okay. So you're fairly new to the test enterprise?

Stafford: Absolutely.

Murphy: Is that intimidating at all?

Stafford: It is. You know, obviously, , considering myself to have a pretty well-rounded understanding of the, I guess what we would kind of term as the operational Air Force --

Murphy: Right.

Stafford: -- that's one thing. You know, new to the test environment. , it's -- again, with a passion for aviation, I've been to the Air Force Museum. I understand the history. Especially, you know, a day like today, October 14th, right, I mean the day we broke the sound barrier.

Murphy: Right.

Stafford: So it's pretty exciting to be in the same type of place where history happened and to

learn those things. So I'm still trying to wrap my head around all that there is in test, test concepts, test theory, those types of things. I'm finding documents online and just trying to, you know, just really trying to wrap my head around what developmental test and evaluation is all about just so I have a basic understanding. I'm not here to be the technical expert --

Murphy: Sure.

Stafford: -- but I think, you know, in my role as an advisor, it's good to understand, have a basic understanding of what that all entails.

Murphy: Okay. So have you set any priorities or goals for your personal -- for yourself?

Stafford: Yeah. I think coming into it, , when I take a look, especially kind of in the environment that we're operating right now -- I mean one of my goals has always been kind of development of our personnel, , and here kind of under AFMC [Air Force Materiel Command] and within the Test Center, that's not just development on the enlisted side of the house. I mean it's got to be officers, it's got to be civilians, and then obviously there's a role that I think we play in helping develop the contractor personnel that work for us. And so I think there's value in that. And then certainly I think the biggest thing is what people typically view the command chief role is, is kind of the care and feeding of our personnel, making sure that we have what we need, that we're taken care of, the resiliency factor and those types of things. So I want to try and champion some of those factors not only for our personnel but also for our families.

Murphy: Okay. Great, great. So you kind of -- you almost alluded to this, the next question. So in today's environment -- I mean a lot, at least from what I've seen, a command chief is out and about and stomping on the podium and all that good stuff, but now you really can't do that. So what kind of methods are you thinking about incorporating to counter that?

Stafford: Yeah. So it's been an interesting first few months. You know, it's challenging to learn about test when you are -- I don't want to say confined to the office, but you're not able to go out because with a majority of the personnel teleworking --, I'm certainly not trying to be out on the flight line and just kind of being in people's way to some degree, right, because everybody -- when you have a command chief, you kind of need a babysitter a little bit more than most people.

Murphy: Right.

Stafford: And so, yeah, it has been a challenge to kind of get out and put eyes on it. So I'm trying to increase my touchpoints with social media. I'm trying to get out there and maybe -- we have some immersions. Now that things are -- I think some of the numbers are starting to stay steady, and so we're starting to schedule some more immersions to get out there and start to see folks. And then just -- yeah, just walking up to folks and checking to see how they're doing, just my wandering around and looking lost.

Murphy: Okay. So under this -- I'm going to term it the new normal, what do you see as your greatest challenge?

Stafford: I think my greatest challenge is truly, because, like I said, with us working in such

diverse areas from around the base, from around the country, I think it's just getting eyes on and trying to really assess what's going on. I mean we have folks that are, like I said before, teleworking, and so we're not able to see them on a regular basis to find out how are things going at home, are they struggling with something. Obviously, we can still see generally if their work is declining, right, but that's just one component of it. And so, you know, we have folks, we have parents that are struggling with child care. We have folks that are struggling with the school programs and then trying to do, , online learning or going to school every couple days, and so that creates a new challenge for families because sometimes both parents work and it's difficult to -- you know, how do you take the kid to and from school during this thing. So just try and tackle those things and try and educate our folks what resources we do have, and then highlight any issues that we need to bring about to our MAJCOM or the Air Force as an enterprise, how do we tackle these things going forward.

Murphy: Okay. Good. So has enlisted PME been affected by this COVID? [Coronavirus Disease]

Stafford: Yeah, it was definitely initially affected because we pretty much just shut down all the typical PME [Professional Military Education] opportunities that we had on the enlisted side. I mean every base has an ALS [Airman Leadership School] and that was pretty much shut down. Our NCO [Non-Commissioned Officer] academies are a little bit more regionalized, but they had the same impact, they were shut down. And then certainly our senior NCO academy and our chief leadership course down at Maxwell were impacted. So I think going forward -- the Barnes Center has done a really good job of trying to create the different distance learning type environments. You know, some schools did it on a virtual methodology. Some schools went back to the traditional in-residence; they just cut down the classroom size and just kind of -- and trying to really focus in and kind of keep the reins on, okay, what's the subject matter that we really need to -- you know, basically condense their curriculum is, I guess, what I'm trying to say. And so, like I said, everybody's a little bit different, but we're still making sure that we're keeping the basics. And so, again, it's -- it becomes difficult because one of the valuable things of having our professional military education is the opportunity to network and to see people face to face and just have some of those experiences. And so I think you often learn better in that environment, and if we're doing it virtually, it's not as effective. And so hopefully we're seeing some little things come back to life where we have in-residence classes, we're just doing it albeit on a smaller scale.

Murphy: So is that the NCO academy and ALS are virtual now?

Stafford: Some of them are, yeah. Some of them are doing -- are in-residence.

Murphy: Okay.

Stafford: But like I said, there are quite a few that are doing virtually or they're doing a combination thereof. So they'll have a little -- a period of virtual schooling, you know, some of the basics, some of just the academics part of it, and then they'll come in for an in-residence portion where they can kind of do more of a practicum on what they previously learned.

Murphy: Okay. Good. So we talked a little bit about the enlisted force and our new normal.

So do you see any significant challenges if this extends -- I mean we're in this 7 months now, so say another 2 years or something?

Stafford: Yeah.

Murphy: Do you see any significance for that today?

Stafford: I definitely -- yeah, I mean as frustrated as people seem to be, you know, just in the 7 months of this problem -- I mean we've already seen, you know, things just being pushed off. Obviously it's delayed some folks, like we just talked about with their professional military education, which has now resulted in the Air Force having to waive certain requirements. You know, as a staff sergeant you're required to do airman leadership school before you can sew on.

Murphy: Oh, that's right. Yeah.

Stafford: So if we put those things off, now we're -- you know, initially if you're looking at it, you're thinking, well, I can't get promoted because I can't attend the PME I need to do. And so the Air Force is obviously taking a look at those things and making sure that we're pushing forward. You know, 2020 has certainly been a challenging year for a variety of different reasons, COVID just being one of them. And so I think, , big picture of the Air Force is reaching out and trying to target some of those different things with diversity and inclusion and making sure that we're doing the right things there. I think the longer we go in this COVID environment and not being able to tackle the challenges, like I said, with child care, with families -- the PT [Physical Training] program is now suspended until the first part of the year.

Murphy: Oh, that's right.

Stafford: And so we have folks that, with some bases not having the ability to PT often outside because of the physical weather they have or whatnot or the gyms being closed, then we have the opportunity --, we have folks that may be not fitting the typical mold that we want people to look and be able to perform in a physical training environment. And so there's caveats to that, right, where they go back to testing right now, currently set for the first part of the year, but obviously that's an acclimation period where people have to begin the latter part of October, November, December to kind of prep for that. And again, those are not always the best times of year to run outside, right, if you're stationed --

Murphy: Sure.

Stafford: -- in Minot, North Dakota, you know, it's a lot different than if you're in Tampa, Florida. So, yeah, those are some of the challenges I think that we're going to have to try and adapt to and get past over the next couple months, and hopefully it doesn't go too long.

Murphy: So the PT testing, is that an Air Force timeline or is that -- has the center started doing that or are they waiting?

Stafford: No, that's -- yeah, that's an Air Force timeline.

Murphy: Okay.

Stafford: Certainly commanders each have their own ability and capability to make sure they're doing what's right. So even if the Air Force were to say -- let's say we -- you know, Air Force says, hey, we're all going to go back to PT testing 1 January, Air Force has given commanders the latitude to adapt their policies to shape it based off what's best for them in this environment. So, again, let's say if you're in an area where you're not able to go and you don't have the facilities to perform or you're still closed -- say the testing facility is still closed because of COVID, the numbers just haven't come down, Air Force is going to allow those commanders to push testing off to a longer time.

Murphy: Okay. So I think we covered about everything. Is there anything that I missed or is there anything you'd like to make an additional comment?

Stafford: Yeah, I think we -- let's see now. I think I said before, kind of introduction, it's just -- it's exciting to kind of be here kind of sitting where the jet age kind of began and, you know, think about the early pioneers of aviation and stuff that kind of came before us. It's exciting to kind of get out and see a lot of these different things. And so, , I'd be interested to see anything you have to present to -- from a historical perspective, to help me learn and better understand not only --, there's things that help my role, but certainly just big picture what the testing and evaluation environment has to offer.

Murphy: And then just one more off the cuff. I just thought about it. You've been in the seat, what, about 3 months now?

Stafford: Yes.

Murphy: Yeah. So have you seen any surprises or is everything, as far as a test center command chief -- are you like, oh, we're not doing this or we are doing that or --

Stafford: So I wouldn't necessarily say that there's any surprises because, you know -- and maybe some of that's just because I haven't been able to kind of get out and expand and see some of the different sites and see what's actually going on. My even just interacting with personnel, it's, you know, kind of eyeballs and foreheads is what I see.

Murphy: Right.

Stafford: And so, just learning more about that. One thing, as I mentioned, that having been on like the focus area for General Goldfein working multi-domain command and control, one thing that does -- that is exciting for me is to see a lot of the things that came out and a lot of the proposals or thoughts that we had on what multi-domain is have now morphed into joint all-domain command and control and multi-domain operations. And with General Azzano kind of bringing forth this Multi-Domain Test Force --

Murphy: Right.

Stafford: -- and we're talking about the thing -- we just finished a brief about, you know, data analytics and big data and artificial intelligence. So to see all those things that -- you know, again, basically 40 years ago we were kind of, okay, here are some thoughts, beginning briefs, stuff like that. To see the Air Force now really wrapping its arms around those things and kind

of moving out and testing them and integrating them into the different weapon systems is pretty exciting.

Murphy: Okay. All right. Well, Chief, I thank you for your time. That was good. This concludes the interview.