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CMSSF Roger Towberman

AFJAGS Podcast: Episode 40

Space Force, Resiliency and Mindset with CMSSF Roger Towberman

HOST: MAJOR RICK HANRAHAN

GUEST: CHIEF MASTER SERGEANT OF THE SPACE FORCE ROGER TOWBERMAN

In today's interview, we speak with Chief Master Sergeant of the Space Force Roger Towberman. We discuss the new Space Force, overview of its structure, and his thoughts on being the first Chief Master Sergeant of the Space Force.

MAJ RICK HANRAHAN:

In this interview, we speak with Chief Master Sergeant of the Space Force, [Roger Towberman](#), the first to hold this position as the highest enlisted noncommissioned officer in the United States Space Force. We discuss the new Space Force, overview on its structure, his thoughts on being the first Chief Master Sergeant of the Space Force, tips on resiliency, and mindset as we continue to work through the global pandemic. Here are a few clips from today's show.

[short intro background music]

SHOW EXCERPTS, CHIEF MASTER SERGEANT ROGER TOWBERMAN:

I think the opportunities and the challenges are two sides of the same coin.

Trust is your asymmetrical advantage, if you will, in an information war.

I don't think there's anything that's a bigger risk to our personal resilience, to our nation, to our world, than our echo chambers.

ANNOUNCER:

Welcome to The Air Force Judge Advocate General's Reporter Podcast, where we interview leaders, innovators, and influencers on the law, leadership, and best practices of the day. And now to your host from [The Air Force Judge Advocate General's School](#).

GUEST INTRODUCTION

MAJ HANRAHAN:

Welcome to another episode from The Air Force Judge Advocate General's School at Maxwell Air Force Base. I'm your host, Major Rick Hanrahan. Remember, if you like the show, please consider subscribing on Apple Podcasts, Spotify or your favorite podcasts platform and leaving a review. This helps us to grow in outreach to the JAG Corps and beyond. Well, we have another incredible guest and leader on the show today.

We have the privilege to welcome Chief Master Sergeant of the Space Force, Roger Towberman on the show to talk about the Space Force and leadership.

Chief Master Sergeant of the Space Force, Roger Towberman is the first to hold this position as the highest enlisted noncommissioned officer in the United States Space Force, effective as of April 2020. In this capacity, he acts as the personal senior enlisted advisor to the Chief of Space Operations and the Secretary of the Air Force on all issues regarding the welfare, readiness, morale, proper utilization and development of the U.S. Space Force.

Through his career spanning over three decades. Chief Towberman has held duties as a ground and airborne cryptologic language and intelligence analyst, in addition to a myriad of leadership roles at the squadron, group, wing, numbered air force, major command and combatant command level. He has deployed multiple times, including in support of Operations JOINT FORGE, ALLIED FORCE, NORTHERN WATCH, SOUTHERN WATCH, IRAQI FREEDOM, ENDURING FREEDOM and UNIFIED PROTECTOR. As a career enlisted aviator, he has also logged more than 4500 flying hours.

Chief Towberman, thank you so much for coming on to the show today. We are super excited to have you here today.

CHIEF TOWBERMAN:

Yes, sir. Thanks. I'm super excited to be here. This is exciting for me. I'm glad that we could you know, we were down at Maxwell for the day and get to kind of see you and do this. It's great. "Fate is a Hunter," as they say. So I'm excited.

FIRST CHIEF MASTER SERGEANT OF THE SPACE FORCE

MAJ HANRAHAN:

Well, Chief, just to get started, maybe you could let us know a little bit more on your current position right as the first Chief Master Sergeant of the Space Force and kind of what your focus is right now.

CHIEF TOWBERMAN:

Yes, sir. So that's kind of cool, right?

This is one of the first things I've done where we actually are calling me that, like I'm the Chief Master Sergeant and of the Space Force.

It took us a long time to get our ranks laid out. And during that time, we felt it was very important to reserve decision space and try to keep the process unbiased and unanchored. And so I was known generically as the Senior Enlisted Advisor for the United States Space Force. I'm so happy now to be the Chief Master Sergeant of the Space Force. Pretty neat. Our priorities as a service in the first year were to invent, as the CSO says, invent the service. And we did that.

We've got a little bit of work still to do on that. But our primary focus in year two is now to integrate the service. And so we move from inventing to integrating, and really looking forward now to welcoming in—we're at 10,000, we hit 10,000 last week, 10,000 total personnel, military and civilians that are officially Guardians.

So it's kind of it's happening it's real and we're very excited for the most recent transfers who really represent this new team of intel and cyber and acquirers. Very excited to have them on board and to flesh out the force and then to turn to them for their help building—I like to say “be a part of your own future.”

And so this is what year two is all about. It's letting those Guardians shape their own future. This morning I talked to a “sprint,” as we call them, that's looking at our resilience and physical fitness programs and our resilience programs. And so, yeah, there it was. There's a lieutenant, there's a sergeant, there's civilians, there's military, there's experts, and there's complete laymen all together for three days to give us their thoughts, give us their ideas, and then hopefully give us something we can execute quickly and get after. So the most important weapon system lives and breathes. So their work this week is maybe some of the most important work that we've done or will do.

SPACE FORCE OVERVIEW

MAJ HANRAHAN:

Would you mind maybe giving just kind of an overview on the Space Force at large, kind of how it's structured, how you came to that realization on how to structure the Space Force.

CHIEF TOWBERMAN:

Yes, sir. So, we're a headquarters like all the military headquarters. We've got our headquarters in D.C. in the Pentagon, and that headquarters is lean and light. It's a—it is structured to integrate with the joint force. So we've got the sort of normal Napoleonic structure there. But it's really a subtext under the, under these different headings.

So we've got a chief operations officer, not a three, but a chief operations officer. That's a combination of the two and the three and the six. We've got a chief human capital officer instead of a one. Now she has an S1. But, we use these sort of these commercial or civilian terms. We thought, hey, this gives us a little different look we

want to approach business, if you will, a little differently. And so the headquarters looks normal from one angle and then hopefully looks a little different or maybe normal to other people from another angle. [External link: [Space Force Leadership](#)].

Below the headquarters, we've got our field commands. I'm always quick to point out that they're not quote unquote “like MAJCOMs”. This is a different service. And so we're really trying hard to remember everything started from scratch.

So field commands look like field commands and they're different then the next echelon in any other service, in some ways, they're the same. In other ways, they're different. The field commands eventually will be three field commands, and we hope to be standing up number two and number three this summer. Right now, we've got [Space Operations Command](#) going strong in Colorado Springs.

And underneath the field command comes deltas. So deltas are one layer of O-6 command, and that's kind of the mission focused units that make sure that we've got the leadership we need without getting the—any redundancy, without slowing us down. And so by removing a couple layers of command, we think we can move quickly from squadron to delta to field command to headquarters.

That's it. And so we're excited about that structure. Those deltas are mission focused and the installation responsibilities are taken on by a separate delta that will focus only on installation stuff. So really to be able to say, hey, I'm an orbital warfare delta, I'm focused on orbital warfare or electronic warfare or space domain awareness, what have you.

So yeah, we're excited. We think it's going to be cool. We—it's certainly light. So if you're going to be that light, you better be—you better learn to be efficient because we just don't we don't have the luxury. You know, it's funny to say it like that, but maybe it should be a new

catchphrase. We don't have the luxury of bureaucracy, right? Like, I definitely don't want that [laughter]. So we'll see what happens. I will tweet that later.

MAJ HANRAHAN:

Great stuff there. So you said you're at about 10,000 Guardians at this point in the integration space. What is the goal for the end strength in the near future there?

CHIEF TOWBERMAN:

So, it will, get a little bigger than that. We'll be inching up towards 20,000 when it's all said and done. So we've got some other service mission transfers yet to come and those decisions yet to be made and then that, the missions will come, and then personnel will come in, you know, to fill out those missions. So we'll see but I think, I think here in a few years you'll see a force probably just shy of 20,000.

OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

MAJ HANRAHAN:

What are some of potentially the opportunities that you see within the Space Force and maybe even the challenges in the near term?

CHIEF TOWBERMAN:

Yeah, I think like with so many things in life, the, I think the opportunities and the challenges are two sides of the same coin. And so we've got such opportunity in our size, in our scale. We've got an opportunity for a degree of, of intimacy, a degree of sense of family that we think is healthy that takes good care of people it's something that we're, as human beings, attracted to this feeling of belonging. It's a reason a lot of people join the military in the first place. We think we can really get that right at our size and scale, where we can deliver an experience where one feels very much included, very much in with their teammates, and that they'll see those same teammates, that those relationships will be built and they'll last over the course of a career.

And not that I develop really good relationships in this assignment and my next assignment, I build new relationships. That will happen to some extent, but we think there'll be a lot more sort of this repetitive theme or this repeating theme of finding those old friends and those old family members. You know, all along the way. It allows us to be mission focused, and again, that also is good.

You know, we're in this business to to win the nation's wars and warfighting takes a level of expertise and focus, that's unlike a lot of other, you know, occupations. And so we think we can really focus on that well, again, because of our size and scale. And we can specialize because there shouldn't be these distractions, hey, you don't have to do this or that. You can just, you know, be awesome. It's one of the reasons that we call our junior enlisted grade specialist, right? Because we wanted them to specialize in warfighting.

So on the other side of that coin and say we're small, and we need help, and we need clout. We need resources, like things are hard to get when you're a small group and some of the things that we'd like to do, you have to wonder, "Hey, can I sustain that?" Is that enough people or big enough effort so that it doesn't collapse under, you know, its own lack of weight, right?

Like, is it enough there to be self-sustaining with any extant population of animals in the world, there's got to be a certain number of them, right, for them, not to become extinct. So we've got to balance that, like how do we take advantage of our size when we can, without kind of falling victim to being the little guy and being, not having potentially the numbers to throw at a problem.

COLLABORATION WITH PRIVATE ENTERPRISE

MAJ HANRAHAN:

Might you be able to discuss a little bit the collaborative piece between the Space Force and kind of private enterprise? I know this has been something that has popped up with [General Raymond](#), where he'd met with a number of the CEOs on some of like [SpaceX](#) in some of these places. Just curious to see if—where that may be headed.

CHIEF TOWBERMAN:

I got to take a selfie with a certain billionaire's dog. It's on my phone. I'm very excited. I pull it out from time to time, "I go, you know whose dog this is?"

Yeah, I think it's worth mentioning that there is an incredible inertia in the commercial, in commercial space. And they're learning and they're iterating and they're experimenting and we can all—should all be happy about that. We should be excited about the commercial space enterprise.

And so certainly we've got a good partnership that's necessary for security. If we want unfettered access to and freedom of maneuver in space, it means teaming closely with our commercial partners. So we do have good relationships across the board. It's fun to watch just as a fan boy, it's fun to sit down and watch things as big as skyscrapers somehow get off the ground and yeah, can't wait to see, you know, who gets to Mars and when there's a permanent presence on the moon. Of course, there's our government partnerships as well, right?

So, it really is kind of this partnering theme in everything that we do. We've got great partnerships with commercial enterprise. We've got great partners across our own government. And we've got great international partners and great coalition partners as well. So it's something that we think we do really well in space, something that we will continue to do and maybe to your earlier question, something that's sort of a necessity when you're small, is that you've got to have great teammates

and you have to be that good, you know, like the middle child was always the best at bridging, you know, making connections and bridging gaps. So I think hopefully that remains our specialty. Because it's certainly fun. It's fun to watch all the teamwork happen and all the, as we say, "explosion" of the business, which is a little dicey word to say when you're talking about space. But yeah, it's fun.

ROLE AS CHIEF MASTER SERGEANT OF THE SPACE FORCE

MAJ HANRAHAN:

Well, Chief, I think it's safe to say that you are a trailblazer in your own right. We recently had Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force [JoAnne Bass](#) on, in her right she is a trailblazer as well. Curious to hear what your views are in your new role as the first Chief Master Sergeant of the Space Force and kind of how you view that role.

CHIEF TOWBERMAN:

Yes, so I think, you know, in most ways, I think it's no different than I viewed leadership at a lot of levels. I hopefully I've learned a little bit along the way. But, you know, at the end of the day, my job is to give a voice to those who have no voice. It's my job to know what's happening out there, to know what's on the minds, in particular of our young Guardians and to make sure that we are a servant organization, and that we are earning their commitment every day. It's easy to assume that, oh, if someone raised their hand, you know, they're ready to, you know, to do whatever. I just don't see it like that, especially these days where the world demands more of us in the in a gig economy where belonging to one organization for a long, long period of time just isn't what young people are thinking about.

You know, we've got to every single day deliver an experience that earns that commitment or we're going to really struggle moving forward. So I think you know, fundamentally, that's it, right? Like that, that's my job is to represent them, to make sure that we're looking out for them, that we're listening and that we're keeping our promises.

And so, you know, I ask folks all the time, hold us accountable. It's easy to stand on stage and make a bunch of promises. It's another thing to keep them. And sometimes for very innocent reasons, we're quote unquote, "breaking a promise." That's when this sort of shared consciousness and the shared obligation to hold each other accountable really comes in handy because most of the time it's an oversight and we're busy or moving past.

But if everyone's willing to raise their hand, go, "Hey, wait a minute, you told me, you know, X, Y and Z", then I go, "Oh, yeah, you know what? You're right." So let me let, you know—let's make sure that we do X, Y, or Z.

In an organization or on a team that's high in trust that's a lot easier to do. So maybe that's the other thing that I try really hard to do is to make sure that we're trustworthy and that, that we're keeping our promises and that when something, when there's a lack of information or when there's wrong information, that the default setting is okay, wait a minute that must be a lack of information or the wrong information, let me, because certainly the institution wouldn't be, you know, doing this or that.

I think it's a modern challenge that in, in an information age, too many times we think about, we think about the information, right? Like, "Oh, wait a minute, Johnny got the wrong message" or "Sally didn't get this message at all." What do we do to change the way that we message? And we talk about the messaging, we talk about how we deliver it or who we deliver it to or, or what we put in a message. I'd suggest that maybe none of that is as important as if you build a foundation of trust.

Trust is your asymmetrical advantage if you will, in an information war. We see that play out right in social media. We see it play out, right? Like what I believe matters more to me than what's presented to me. And so if we get trust right, if the institution gets trust right, and every Guardian knows that the Space Force has their back then, hey, if they didn't get a memo on time or if somebody twisted something the wrong way or

whatever, it doesn't create the kind of anxiety that it would if they didn't trust us.

And so to me, it's that investment in trust. It's that investment in a culture of trust that gives you a buffer because you can't win. It's just you can't always tell everybody exactly what you ought to tell them at the moment you ought to tell them, no matter how hard you try, like things, things happen. And so that's maybe the other thing. Give a voice, you know, earn commitment, and then earn that trust and show that we're trustworthy. And try to underpin everything with that. Cause, yeah, soundbites are easy. Trust, trust is hard.

RESILIENCY TIPS

MAJ HANRAHAN:

Great stuff there, Chief. Thank you so much for sharing that. And I think that's a natural segue into this question. I know that you, along with Chief Bass, are very big on the people piece, right? Taking care of the people. Take care of the people, you take care of the mission. We're in about a year now into COVID. People still struggling through that. Hopefully there's a light at the end of the tunnel. I think we can see that at this point. But do you have any tips on—whether resiliency tips or other tips to help folks as we continue to work through global pandemic?

CHIEF TOWBERMAN:

Yeah, tips. You know, I think you talked about trailblazing earlier. And I think one of the things when I think, and I spend a little bit of time—actually, I spend as much time as I can in places where my phone doesn't work. And you need two points, if you're going to get somewhere. You need to know where you're going and you need to know where you are.

And I think sometimes with resilience, we forget that it starts with knowing where we are. Like, you've got to know yourself and you really have to kind of look internally and know where you're currently at before you can, you know, plot a course to improvement. It's easy to have a growth mindset or it's easier maybe to

have a growth mindset than it is to really kind of spend that time on introspection —"How do I need to grow? What do I need to work on?" So maybe, maybe that's one thing that maybe a different way of looking at it than some people look. But there's just really starts kind of looking at ourselves.

The other thing, one of the things with COVID, we've all, I think, watched a little more TV, right? [laughter] Like we've all spent time in and you know, I was bingeing one of these reality shows "Alone." I don't know if you've seen it, and where the premise is that we drop experts, survival experts, they drop them off alone with just ten items and they have to survive. And whoever survives the longest. And what's fascinating about that show to me is, it's not their survival skills that usually, or lack of skills, that usually get them to drop out. That's not the determining factor.

For many of them, the determining factor is that they're alone and it's not fun. Nobody's meant to be by themselves. We are a gregarious social species. We need each other, and COVID has reminded many people of that. And COVID has exploited that weakness in pretty much in all of us, right? And so we really just have to, I think remind ourselves, even—I'm as introverted as they come and I have great need to disappear on my own. I certainly do. I spend a lot of time by myself. I couldn't spend all time by myself. We all need people. So I think to know that, to understand that, to not be shy about that is important.

And then again, I think COVID may be a blessing in all of that. I think we've started to realize that this old binary choice of I can have a digital connection or I can have an analog connection, right? I think we've kind of learned that's not really true, right? That's not the modern world. I actually can make very real, very analog connections via digital means if I want to. And so hopefully that opens things up a little bit then. And hopefully we're like, "oh, no, no, no," like the depth of the relationship—certainly [laughter] you know, it's certainly we all want our hugs, right?

Like, I miss that tactile high fives and handshakes and hugs. We can have real conversations, though, we can really have deep emotional connections, though, with the augmentation of modern world. And so maybe we've got a more enlightened position on that these days. I hope that we do. Seeing somebody's face on a screen isn't quite as good as being in the same room, but it's better than not seeing them at all, right?

And so hopefully we continue to connect more regularly and with more kind of that extended family. In particular, again, I think a military challenge, right, is if I was still back home in my hometown of 2000 people, like I can see all of them all the time, but I'm not. And so can I reach out more regularly? Can I connect with my extended family, with my extended friends? Yeah. I mean, hopefully the answer is yes.

FINAL THOUGHTS

MAJ HANRAHAN:

So we've talked a lot of great things here already, Chief, and we're just scratching the surface, of course. Just want to leave you kind of your—an opportunity for you to offer your final thoughts on what we talked about today for our listeners, if there's anything that you just would like our listeners to know about, whether we've talked about it or not so far.

CHIEF TOWBERMAN:

No. You know, I appreciate anyone would listen to me, you know, talk about anything. So, you know, I would I'd just say thanks.

I'd ask really to think, right? To think about what we've talked about and to open our minds. We should be doing nothing out of habit. Every day should be the new and amazing and limitless opportunity that it is, right? All of us should feel that, like every day when we get up, I can do anything. And if I wanna, you know, exercise today, it doesn't have to be Monday or the first of the month or the first of the year [laughter]. Like, I can just I can just start today, right?

I don't have to turn left when I go out of the driveway. I can turn right. Like, no kidding, to just question everything. In a world that delivers things to us without us asking, that's based on what the world already knows about how we think and what we do. There's real advantage to those people that keep the world guessing, right? That I'm going to do something different.

I don't think there's anything that's a bigger risk to our personal resilience, to our nation, to our world than our echo chambers. And it's getting beyond our echoes that all of us should be trying harder to do that. I have an endless, endless supply of echo. I mean, I can't possibly sift through all of the information that's delivered to me in a day based on like I said, on what the world knows about me. I can't possibly get through it all. And so if I get trapped in that echo chamber, how can I be healthy? How can I meet new people? How can I appreciate the diversity and the greatness of the world?

And so we should constantly challenge our habits. We should constantly seek out new people, new hobbies, new ways of doing things. Keep the algorithms guessing. Right? Like, I mean, it should be our goal to get just weird suggestions from social media or from shopping sites [laughter]. Like we've got them so confused that they don't even know what to offer us. Like, to me, that's winning is, is to really tear down the walls of—that the echoes have built up around us. And, and remember that, like, everything's better when you see it from different angles like everything's better. And so maybe that's the last thing I'd say. Keep the shopping apps guessing.

MAJ HANRAHAN:

Chief, thank you so much for coming on today. Talking about the Space Force, resiliency, mindset. Incredible. Thank you so much, Chief.

CHIEF TOWBERMAN:

Yes, sir. No, thanks. I yeah, I'm going to have to hashtag this, "keep the shopping apps guessing" now.

But, no, I appreciate it. Thanks for having a great conversation with me and bringing out some fun conversation. I really appreciate you and thanks for what you do.

TAKEAWAYS

MAJ HANRAHAN:

That concludes our interview with Chief Master Sergeant of Space Force Roger Towberman. Here are three of my takeaways from the interview.

NUMBER ONE, the Space Force doesn't have the "luxury of bureaucracy."

Chief Towberman mentioned how the burgeoning Space Force is currently comprised of around 10,000 Guardians, including active duty and civilians, with an end strength goal of around 20,000 personnel to include anticipated inter-service transfers. As such, the Space Force is quite small in comparison to the other services. Its structure is light and lean to include headquarters located in Washington D.C. and just a few echelons of command to include field commands, with three total expected, that will be somewhat similar to MAJCOMs; deltas, which are primarily organized around a specific function; and or squadrons and garrisons.

The lean size and structure of the Space Force presents both a challenge and opportunity, as Chief Towberman stated. It requires greater collaboration with sister services, commercial partners, foreign governments and other actors to accomplish the Space Force mission. It also offers a degree of intimacy and familiarity that perhaps other services might not provide in the same fashion. For example, Chief Towberman anticipates Guardians will likely cross career paths with fellow Guardians, likely multiple times over a career due to the small size of the force. The Space Force also aims to allow Guardians to specialize without too many other distractions, ancillary duties and the like in order to focus on its core mission.

NUMBER TWO, “trust is our asymmetrical advantage in an information war.”

As discussed by Chief Towberman, in an information age, we think about information constantly. For example, we talk about the message, who is sending the message, where the message is coming from, etc. However, the message, i.e. information, according to Chief Towberman, is not ultimately what matters the most. Rather, it’s the people, in building their trust that is the X-Factor or asymmetrical advantage. It’s the investment in the culture of trust that matters. As Chief Towberman said, if we get trust right and underpin everything on that trust, then other issues and hurdles will fall into place. But building that trust takes work, patience, listening to others, and a service oriented mindset set on the long term outcome of an organization like the Space Force.

AND NUMBER THREE, “keep the algorithms guessing” or “keep the shopping apps guessing,”

as Chief Towberman stated. So what does this mean? It means to think and act with an open mind. Don’t just follow the crowd because everyone else is. As we know, we live in a world built on technology that delivers information and things to us without us even asking, based on what very sophisticated programming and algorithms “believe” they know about us. The challenge is to not lose sight of this. Don’t fall into a rut of mundane habit. Challenge assumptions where needed and verify sources of information.

[background music]

Look to innovate from the routine, to increase efficiency and optimize results. And constantly seek out new ways of doing things, responding and living. If you live in this proactive manner, as Chief Towberman mentioned, you’ll have the shopping apps so confused they won’t even know what to show you. And to Chief Towberman, that’s winning, because you’re seeking out new opportunities and growth beyond what’s pre-programmed. That concludes our interview with Chief Master Sergeant of the Space Force Roger Towberman.

Thank you for listening. We’ll see you on the next episode.

ANNOUNCER:

Thank you for listening to another episode of The Air Force Judge Advocate General’s Reporter Podcast. Please subscribe to our show on [iTunes](#) or [Stitcher](#) and leave a review. This helps us grow, innovate, and develop an even better JAG Corps. Until next time.

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[music ends]

GLOSSARY

- **AFJAGS:** Air Force Judge Advocate General’s School
- **CEO:** chief executive officer
- **CSO:** chief of space operations
- **JAG:** judge advocate general