



Twentieth Chief of Staff of the Air Force General Mark A. Welsh III (U.S. Air Force/Scott M. Ash)

## An Interview with Mark A. Welsh III

General Mark A. Welsh III is Chief of Staff of the U.S. Air Force. As Chief, he serves as the senior uniformed Air Force officer responsible for the organization, training, and equipping of 690,000 Active-duty, Guard, Reserve, and

civilian forces serving in the United States and overseas. As members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Welsh and the other Service chiefs function as military advisors to the Secretary of Defense, National Security Council, and the President.

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*Joint Force Quarterly* Editor in Chief William T. Eliason interviewed General Welsh at his Pentagon office.

*JFQ:* Could you describe what today's U.S. Air Force brings to the joint fight that some might not be aware of?

**General Welsh:** Interestingly, it's nothing new as to what we have been doing since 1947. The missions haven't changed since then and I don't anticipate them changing in the future. We still are the only Service that can provide a theater's worth of air superiority, and we are the only Service with the command and control to do it. We are the only Service that brings global [air] mobility and a lot of [air] mobility. We have 130,000 Airmen involved in the global mobility mission every day. We have about 53,000 Airmen involved in theater command and control, ballistic missile defense command and control, and air defense command and control for all the combatant commanders. We have about 35,000 Airmen involved in the intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance [ISR] enterprise 7 days a week, 365 days a year. And they are doing tasks for the United States in every theater of conflict—everything from collecting data to flying sensors on them to flying platforms with sensors on them to moving data and information through the distribution system to the right decisionmakers at the right time. These things are sometimes in the background, but without them nothing else happens in the joint fight. In addition, many also don't see the two legs of the nuclear triad that we operate every single day with about 25,000 great Airmen. Accordingly, a lot of what the Air Force brings to the fight is not very clear until you get to a very high-end tempo.

One of the benefits of having an Air Force that can provide unparalleled air superiority is that you get statistics like this: Since 1953, 7 million men and women have deployed to contingencies around the world and tens of thousands have given their lives in service to the Nation. Not one of them died from a bomb dropped from an airplane. Air superiority isn't something you can assume away. It is something you have to earn, and we've been earning it for a long time.

*JFQ: One of the most discussed operational-level topics in recent years has been Air-Sea Battle [ASB]. Can you talk about how that effort with the Navy is developing and its relationship to the strategic rebalancing of our forces to the Pacific?*

**General Welsh:** What Air-Sea Battle is to me isn't as much a rebalancing to the Pacific; it's more of a rebalancing of thought, of acquisition, and ultimately of equipment, tactics, and thinking to an environment in the Pacific, which is an environment where air and maritime forces will participate more and more together. But it's not focused on the Pacific. It's focused on an environment. Threats are getting more sophisticated. For example, detection ranges of radars are increasing. Sensor ranges on aircraft and ships are increasing significantly. Weapons ranges that are tied to those sensors are also increasing, so we have to figure out different ways to get into the threat environment and different ways to defeat it. Moreover, if there are areas where the Air Force, Navy, Marine Corps, or Army are going to be working together so we can extend our own sensor ranges—that is, extend our own ability to engage from a distance—then we've got to be focused on that capability. That's what Air-Sea Battle is. It's changing the way we think about developing those abilities. The good news is it's being addressed by all four Services. All four Service Chiefs are talking about how we can better integrate ASB.

As far as the Air Force is concerned, AirLand Battle never died. We must continue to develop our capabilities and work with the Army, Navy, and Marine Corps too with the right kinds of equipment that connect correctly, and focus on the right types of training so we can use air most effectively in every scenario we might face.

*JFQ: Although often mentioned as the most expensive program in the history of the Department of Defense, how important is the F-35 to the future of joint and coalition warfighting?*

**General Welsh:** It's critically important. I mentioned the importance of air

superiority before. When we capped the F-22 at 187 airplanes, about two-thirds of those are operational airplanes. That's not enough to provide air superiority over a theater of operations in a high-intensity conflict. So we're going to have to augment it with something. Right now it's with our current F-15 fleet. We are going to have to use the F-35 to augment the F-22 fleet in the air-to-air arena. That wasn't the original plan. If you'll remember, the game plan was to have two complementary capabilities—the F-22 was for the air superiority mission and the F-35 dismantled the integrated air defense system [IADS] and conducted the initial ground attack in a tough environment. But now the F-35 is going to have to do both missions. Additionally, the abilities it will bring from a stealth perspective, a sensor perspective, a data integration perspective, and a weapons delivery perspective are absolutely essential to operating against IADS and against the kind of air threat we expect 10 years from now. There's a reason other countries are developing what they call fifth-generation fighters, and they are going to be more capable than what we have on the ground right now. We need to continue to move forward or lose the technological edge, and then we will lose more people in air-to-air combat. The F-35 is essential to what we are going to do.

We don't want a fair fight. If we are going to commit the sons and daughters of America to conflict, I want it to be a runaway, and we should win every game 100-0 as far as I'm concerned. It's really the Nation's choice, but if you want to be able to fight the high-end fight you have to have high-end gear.

*JFQ: How have the ongoing budget pressures affected how the Air Force operates today and its plans for the future of the force, and what steps are you taking to mitigate these fiscal issues?*

**General Welsh:** If you look at the sequester's level of funding over the next 10 years, it will drive us to get smaller. We also have to keep the force balanced as we get smaller or we will not be able to

train and operate as an Air Force. Having more force structure than you can afford makes no sense at all. Therefore we have to look at, for example, what mix the Air Force has in the Active and Reserve components. You have to decide between modernization and readiness and then figure out where the balance is. You have to have both. You have to be ready to fight and do what the Nation needs us to do, and you have to be modernized and capable and viable as a threat to be able to do that 10 years from now.

*JFQ: Recently, all the Services seem to be dealing with a constant drumbeat of negative events, from toxic leaders to cheating on nuclear testing to sexual assaults. Would you talk about your efforts to deal with these behavior-related issues in the Air Force?*

**General Welsh:** All we can do is hit this head on. We need to take an honest look at ourselves in the mirror. As long as we continue to do that we will be fine. There are going to be disagreements between the American public and the Services as to what is right, appropriate, legal, and illegal on any given incident because everybody won't have the facts straight. The most important thing to do when we have an incident is to get the facts straight and then figure how to deal with it from there.

Sexual assault is a major issue for all the Services. The fact that it is a major issue in society at large doesn't change the fact that we have to deal with our problem first, and I believe we should lead the country on this issue. We have all the tools to do it. We have an education system, a training system, and a legal system. We have people who care and are engaged to help. We've got victim care, medical care, and psychological care. We have all the tools to do this better than anyone else. We've got a very active and engaged partner on this issue with the U.S. Congress including staff in the Department of Defense—and especially the Secretary of Defense. We've greatly expanded our Sexual Assault Prevention and Response [SAPR] office at the Air Staff level. We went from a small staff to 34 people in our



780<sup>th</sup> Test Squadron member Dale Julio briefs General Welsh and General Janet Wolfenbarger, Air Force Materiel Command commander, about Small Diameter Bomb II test progress and findings at Eglin Air Force Base (U.S. Air Force/Samuel King, Jr.)

office who are going to manage this for the Air Force. The SAPR office includes subject experts, metrics professionals, behaviorists, former commanders, and legal counsels, among others, so we can look at this problem from many different angles. We also are able to connect with a lot of different groups that have expertise in the problem. We have had a lot of success in this arena, but we will never be satisfied until we are down to zero sexual assaults. Therefore, we've got to keep looking for game-changing actions in every part of the spectrum that affects this horrible crime: from screening people before they join the Service, to educating people and training them once they are Servicemembers, to preventing the crime itself, to handling the reporting of victims of the crime—that

is, making them feel more comfortable to report—to making sure they get the post-incident care they need. One successful program is the Special Victims Counsel program, which has had a major effect on the willingness of victims to continue to trial and to participate in prosecutions. The goal is to come to the right legal outcome on every case. Anybody who doubts the sincerity of our effort just needs to go to any base in the Air Force and start talking about this subject.

I'll give you some examples of the change in approach to sexual assault. Over the last year our reporting is up 76 percent inside the Air Force, and it's about 60 percent across the Department of Defense. Conviction rates are up. Prosecution rates are up. People in the

Air Force—commanders and senior non-commissioned officers—can talk to you knowledgeably about this now. They now know a lot more than they did before. They understand victim behavior better—not well enough, but better. Before we started the Special Victim Counsel program, 13 percent of the victims who reported under the Restricted Reporting program, which meant we couldn't investigate, would change to Unrestricted Reporting and allow us to investigate. Of those who now have Special Victims Counsels assigned to them, 50 percent are changing to Unrestricted Reporting so we can press forward with investigations and prosecutions.

Another significant issue is the cheating incident in the nuclear business. We

are trying to determine whether it was a systemic problem or a onetime occurrence. What caused it other than people just stepping away from integrity? What led them in that direction? We have to be willing to be honest with ourselves about what causes these issues, and then change as an institution to keep it from happening again.

When it comes to general officer behavior including toxic leadership and ethics, last year we instituted a new 360-degree assessment for these commissioned officers. The Army has a good working model for assessing general officers, which we adopted with some adjustments. We went through a full cycle and we will adjust it again this year. The goal is to expand this to wing commanders, Senior Executive Service members, and command chief master sergeants. The idea is to find some of these toxic leader indicators before someone becomes a senior leader in the Air Force.

*JFQ: Can you discuss the importance of modernization efforts such as the new air refueling tanker, the KC-46, and the next generation bomber for the future joint force and how they will fit into future defense budgets?*

**General Welsh:** First of all they *have* to fit. We looked at the balance of readiness today versus modernization for tomorrow. As topline budgets come down, how do we balance capability, capacity, and readiness? We had to make a fundamental decision that modernization is not optional. We have to modernize to be competitive as an Air Force. Once that decision was made, the next step was determining what needed to be built new versus modernized by upgrading or adding more capability. We found three areas that we have to recapitalize. The first is the F-35, which we have already discussed.

The second is the KC-46. Our tanker fleet is the lifeblood of American military mobility. One of the fascinating things about our job is that I have never heard the question “Can we get it there?” Not once. This is a huge compliment to everybody from the U.S. Army’s Military

Surface Deployment and Distribution Command, the Navy’s Military Sealift Command, U.S. Transportation Command, and most certainly Air Mobility Command. We’re confident we can get fuel, supplies, and aeromedical support to troops anywhere in the world because we have great professionals who do this unbelievably well. But the lifeblood of the whole effort is air-refueling capability. Operations *Odyssey Dawn* and *Unified Protector* in Libya didn’t happen without air refueling. None of the air operations over Afghanistan or Iraq happened without air refueling capability. When we buy the last of 179 KC-46As, we’ll still have more than 200 KC-135s that are 65 years old or older. That’s just insane. We have got to recapitalize the rest of the mobility fleet, and the KC-46 is just the start. That was the KC-X program. We still have the KC-Y and KC-Z programs to replace our entire tanker fleet. This isn’t optional. We have to replace our tanker fleet.

Third, we believe that if the mission of the U.S. Air Force is to be able to fight and win a high-intensity air fight along with our joint forces, then we have to recapitalize the bomber force. analysis shows we need about 80 to 100 bombers to be able to provide nuclear deterrence as a part of the nuclear triad and to support the sortie rates required in a large-scale conflict. We have 20 B-2s that will survive for decades. In addition, we have a B-1 fleet that is a part of the solution, but it probably won’t survive past 10 to 15 years. It’s kind of like the Swiss Army Knife of combat aviation—it’s doing it all and doing it well, but it’s not the long-term solution. We also have B-52s, which will age out some day. You really can’t keep flying them until they are 100 years old, and even if we could, we shouldn’t. We have got to look at a bomber fleet of 80 to 100 because that’s what the operational analysis shows we need. To accomplish this we need to buy the long-range strike bomber. That program is on track to deliver aircraft in the mid 2020s.

Those are the three modernization efforts. They are fully funded except where sequestration cuts made it impossible to buy as many F-35s as we wanted during

this particular cycle. But we are close and we will continue to emphasize those to the top of our budget profiles.

*JFQ: What is your plan for modernization of the ICBM [intercontinental ballistic missile] fleet?*

**General Welsh:** Right now we have a line in our budget to start the groundwork for the next generation of ICBMs. We think that by 2030 we must have a program to replace our current ICBMs. Somewhere in that timeframe we need to be building and fielding a new ICBM platform, or a new capability to take its place. Right now we are looking for a replacement for the Minuteman III ICBM. All the things that go into the nuclear enterprise—the weapons recapitalization requirements, the nuclear command and control and communications requirements—have to be examined over the next couple of years to make sure that it’s affordable under sequestration levels for the next 10 years.

*JFQ: Concerns over preserving existing systems including one you flew in your career, the A-10 attack aircraft, seem to have added to the fiscal pressures you face in your Title 10 responsibilities. How is the Air Force dealing with these dual pressures of modernization and readiness of the force? For a number of reasons there are people who want them to stay.*

**General Welsh:** I am one of the people who love legacy systems. The problem is we can’t afford them. We don’t have enough money for everything we would like to keep, so the question is how do we save billions of dollars—and we are talking about billions of dollars per year, not millions. Just 3 years ago, when we submitted the FY12 [fiscal year 2012] budget, the planned budget amount for FY15 was \$20 billion higher than what we submitted this year. The sequestration decrement in our planning last year was over \$12 billion. We’ve got to make significant cuts. This is what sequester-level funding means. Furthermore, we

understand that we have to be a part of the national-level effort to cut the deficit. We are going to have to cut things we don't want to cut in order to be capable, credible, and viable 10 years from now.

One of the problems we have right now is that for the last 14 years all we have done is close air support [CAS]. Everybody is very aware of what is going on in the CAS arena and they are focused on platforms that support it. That's why they are beloved. But the issue isn't close air support. Close air support is a mission; it's not a specific aircraft. We can do it with lots of other airplanes as well. Since 2006 nearly 80 percent of the sorties have been flown by other airplanes. The A-10 is a fantastic CAS platform. If we can afford to keep everything, we should keep the A-10.

*JFQ: What did you take away from the Air Force's recent experience in readiness cut-backs given continuing budget pressures?*

**General Welsh:** Readiness degrades in a hurry. When you stand squadrons down, it's not a straight line—it drops in a curve. You're less ready for a while, then you become really less ready, and then you become completely unready. It's not just people, pilots, or ground crew. It's the maintainers—the airframes themselves. It's all the people in the background who keep that running. The depot systems are affected; the work forces in the depots are affected; your working capital funds are affected; and all of those things take time to reconstitute and reenergize. When you start affecting readiness by cutting things like Red Flag [exercises] and weapons school classes, you don't get those back. You have a gap in that Ph.D.-level warfighter force for the rest of that career time period, maybe 20 years or so. Readiness is a problem for us. The impact on people surprised me a little bit because, frankly, I hadn't thought about this aspect until I saw it. Our people really like being the best in the world at what they do. They're proud of it. They work hard to be that kind of Airman. And if they don't think they can be that person because they're not going to have the funding to develop their

careers, to be professionally educated, to be trained, to be ready to go—they'll walk. We can lose an awful lot of things in the Air Force and stay successful, but if we lose Airmen, we're done.

*JFQ: What have you learned from the Air Force's commitment of a great deal of resources to field Unmanned Combat Air Vehicle capabilities in support of joint and coalition operations? Will the joint demand for these capabilities continue to drive Air Force requirements for these systems?*

**General Welsh:** We have learned over the last 14 years that we can manage a very large, diverse global ISR [intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance] enterprise, and we can do it well. What we need to learn is that the ISR force structure we have today is not the ISR force structure we need for the future. We're working toward 65 orbits of RPA [remotely piloted aircraft] support based on the environment in Afghanistan and Iraq. This includes a lot of small squad support, unit-level support, high-value targeting, and pattern of life development. These kinds of things drive a large number of requirements—large dwell requirements that drive you to do business in a way that is aligned to that environment. That is not what we need in the rest of the combatant commands. Taking 65 orbits for what we had in Afghanistan and moving them to U.S. Pacific Command [USPACOM] is not what the commander of USPACOM needs. How do we transition our ISR enterprise from what we have, which is exactly right for the fight we are in, to the right ISR enterprise for the fights we could face in the future? While not forgetting the lessons we have learned, we must focus on where to put our ISR enterprise. Do we put it in Special Operations Command and AFSOC [Air Force Special Operations Command]? We think we should. We need to “plus up” a little of that capability for the small unit squad support for the counterterrorism fight. But we need to be developing an ISR enterprise that is more what the commander of USPACOM or the commander of U.S.

Southern Command might be looking for in scenarios in their theaters.

*JFQ: All the Services will see significant reductions in personnel in the next few years. How will this affect your ongoing efforts to develop the Air Force's Total Force Integration?*

**General Welsh:** We're working Total Force Integration pretty hard. If you jump on the Jackson, Mississippi, [Air National] Guard's C-17 Air Medical Evacuation run every week to Al Udeid Air Base [near Doha, Qatar]—picking up wounded warriors along the way to return them to Ramstein Air Base and back to the United States—you are going to see a Guard aircraft and a Guard crew, a Reserve medical detachment caring for Servicemembers, and an Active-duty Critical Care Team caring for critically wounded warriors. That's what it looks like inside an airplane. That's the way the Air Force operates at the front end. And that's exactly the way it ought to operate. The key for us in the back end is to make it look like that here on the Air Staff, too. We have worked hard over the last year on a process we loosely called the Total Force Task Force. This group was charged with determining the way ahead for a better Total Force Integration and how we would institutionalize it in the Air Force.

We have looked hard at every piece of our force structure and determined how much we can move into the Reserve component. If we can be more efficient and stay operationally capable and credible moving to the Reserve component, why wouldn't we? We've also looked at a lot of other integration activities. Right now we have a beta test going with a single personnel office at three different bases: Pease [National Guard Base], Peterson [Active AF Base], and March [Reserve Base]—one Guard, one Active, one Reserve, and a single personnel office manages all three components. We call it the “three in one initiative.” If it works, we'll spread it to other bases where we have all three components.

We brought in our first deputy director on the Air Staff—an Air Force



Officers with 5<sup>th</sup> Bomb Wing at Minot Air Force Base in lower deck of B-52 Stratofortress (U.S. Air Force/Lance Cheung)

Reserve two star. We should be taking from the entire force the best talent to fill the highest positions we have in the Air Force and that requires a big commitment by the Guard and Reserve to keep those people current, active, and qualified for these kinds of jobs. We are looking at integrating everything we can so we can develop officers who are assignable across these lines. We are looking at removing the restrictions to common sense application of Guard, Reserve, and Active-duty manpower and activity.

*JFQ: What is your view of space and cyber as a part of the Air Force's mission going forward?*

**General Welsh:** The only thing that's changed in the U.S. Air Force mission statement since 1947 is the term *space superiority*. Now we have air and space superiority, which I don't think the President imagined in 1947. We do all of those missions now, or should be looking for how we could do those missions, in

three dimensions, not just one. Cyber isn't a mission—it's a domain like air and space. So we do command and control in and through the cyber domain; we do ISR in and through the cyber domain; we do strike in and through the cyber domain. Someday, we will be doing precision air-drop of data in the cyber domain. We will be doing armed escort of data in the cyber domain. We will have to provide cyber superiority in a particular region of that domain to operate there. All the mission concepts we have in our five mission areas apply in both cyber and space. But ISR is still ISR, whether you are collecting your information through the cyber domain or a sensor through the space domain, or if you are doing it off of an airplane in the air domain. The mission is what's important. Over the next 20 to 30 years, how we do those missions will change.

One of the interesting things to watch is the ratio between the domains of where we do this mission. I can imagine more missions shifting to the space and cyber domains until eventually they become either virtually contested or congested

to the point that we are going to have to come back to the other domains until we come up with a technological solution to the congestion. That debate and discussion inside the Air Force are what we are trying to drive. How do you move missions between domains? How do you balance these different domains? Will this cost more money?

When you talk about the missions we support in joint warfighting, just think of those 25,000 people we have in the space arena who are doing everything from precision navigation, precision timing, secure communications, missile warning—all the things that are enabled by the assets we operate in space that the joint force has just come to accept. But it's all transparent, and we play a role on the national side of the house in the cyber domain just like all of the Services.

*JFQ: The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs has directed a refocused effort for improving professional military education, especially in areas of leader development*

*and professional ethics. As a graduate of National War College, how would you assess that experience, and have your joint assignments influenced your career and your views of jointness today?*

**General Welsh:** The most important thing I learned at Fort McNair is that I'm not smart enough. The conversations we had there about national security, national security policy, the world stage and all of the actors on it, activities that these actors conducted, and the motivations behind those activities just left me feeling like I didn't know enough about that stage, about those actors, and about those activities. So it drove me to learn more about the agencies inside our own government because there really are no unexpected issues in the interagency. If you take the time to understand the other agencies, their positions will never surprise you. That's a way to keep emotion out of the discussion. We shouldn't be astonished about the way the Air Force does business. There's a reason it does business the way it does. There's a reason the Army and the Navy do things the way they do. There's a reason the Defense Intelligence Agency and the Central Intelligence Agency [CIA] operate the way they do. The National War College gives you that opportunity to learn because you are side by side with people from all these organizations in the Department of Defense and other parts of government. Once you get to know them, you'll find they are great people whom you can trust and count on. Their environments, tasks, and orders are different. The things they are focused on are different. That doesn't mean they are bad, evil, or unhelpful. It just means that they have a different job. The more we understand that concept, the more we can explain our own organizations when things aren't going the way they should. That's the biggest thing I took away from the National War College. Everywhere I've been outside the Air Force, I've learned something that has helped me. When we talked about the A-10 issue a few moments ago, it's not about A-10s or CAS. It's about balancing across the mission areas.

At the Army Command and General Staff College, I attended its tactics course,

which is the single best professional military education course I've ever attended. In tactics, when they talk about what airpower brings to a ground force commander or a joint force commander, there are a couple of really important points. Close air support is not the way we reduce most losses on the battlefield. CAS is important, critical to understand, and personal, but it's not the way to save huge numbers of Servicemembers on the ground. That's done through *air superiority*. When you provide freedom from attack and freedom to attack, you eliminate the enemy nation's will to fight and it shortens the war—including strategic bombardment, deep interdiction, destroying their infrastructure and their command and control capability. You eliminate the enemy's second echelon forces including their operational reserve so they cannot commit at the time and place of their choosing, which causes a huge impact on friendly forces. Those are the things you do to really affect the ground fight. A-10s don't do those things. But F-16s, F-15Es, and B-1s do. That's why the operational analysis showed we could give up the A-10. Those other platforms can do CAS, although not as well as the A-10, but they are really good at those other concepts.

I worked for the CIA for 2 and a half years and I loved every day. The agency has a different way of looking at every problem. It taught me that there are other solutions than those in uniform will think through, and there are incredibly talented and gifted people trying to make those solutions a reality. We just don't understand or know what they are doing every day, but it can be an incredibly complementary capability. I worked at the North Atlantic Treaty Organization for a while as one of the air commanders. What a fascinating experience that was. Alliance officers were no less patriotic to their own nations, no less committed to the defense of their country, no less dedicated to doing the job as well as they could. They just see the job differently sometimes, and they don't have the resources that the United States military is blessed with. It doesn't mean they aren't great partners. It doesn't mean they won't stand and die

beside us, as they have in Afghanistan. It just means we have to approach them in a different way. They will be there when we need them. They have proven that. I believe that every time I do something that is outside of the mainstream, I learn something that makes me a better officer and a better person, and it certainly gives me a better understanding of the objectives of the Nation.

*JFQ: Do you have any regrets about things you have been unable to do in this job?*

**General Welsh:** This is a hard job to prepare for. I think any Service Chief will tell you two things. First, you are always going to be doing different things than you thought you would because the situation to some extent drives what you can do to be successful. My time has been spent drawing down a conflict and drawing down resources. My job is to make sure that the Chiefs two and three cycles down the road are well configured to be reasonably successful when we grow the Air Force account or when we modernize on the next cycle. Every Chief, when they walked in the door, has had issues to face that were unexpected, and they had to adjust to them. Second, it is impossible to relay just how deeply you feel about everything that affects the people in your Service. This is a weird thing that I know all the Service Chiefs share. I don't think someone can really feel this unless they are in the chair.

I want to add that, in this job, you get to do things that are unbelievable honors. I spoke at General David C. Jones's [former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs] memorial service. I spoke at Robbie Risner's memorial service. I shook hands with the three Doolittle Raiders at their final toast. It is unbelievable the things we as Service chiefs get to do on behalf of the men and women of our Services. So when people say, "Well, tough job" or "tough times," there is never a bad day to be a Service chief. It is such a privilege. It just is. JFQ

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This interview has been edited for brevity.