

## MILITARY

# Proud, Honored, and Humbled

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**Interviewed By: Douglas Lindsay**

**Lindsay:** Would you mind sharing a little bit about how you feel the Air Force Academy set you up for success in the military?

**Welsh:** I think the biggest thing that the Academy taught me, and it taught me almost instantly, was that I was probably never going to be the best at anything. For most of us, you walk into a much bigger pond than you came from. There is just a ton of talent that walks into the door with you and it doesn't take long to figure out that you aren't the best looking, most athletic, smartest...you really aren't the best at anything. Not that I thought I was the best, but it became very clear to me that I wasn't when I arrived. The good news about that was it reinforced some of the things that my father told me. What my dad told me when I was very young was that I probably wasn't going to be the best, but no one could try harder than I could. He also mentioned to me that no one could care more than I did and because of that, I need to respect everyone. When you think about the fact that everyone you try to lead is better than you at something, it changes your view. If you realize that many of the people you lead are much better than you at a whole lot of things and some of them are better than you at everything—including leadership—it is a little sobering. But it shouldn't be sobering really, it should be empowering. All of a sudden, you have an IQ you didn't have yesterday. You have new perspectives on problems. You have tools to create solutions that you probably couldn't create on your own.

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For example, I laugh a lot when people talk about becoming more innovative. I don't get any more innovative because I think harder. I get more innovative because I listen to other people's ideas. I think the same thing is true about leadership. Accept the fact that you are good enough. Be confident in the people that put you in the position. Whether that is as a cadet at the Air Force Academy, as an officer commanding men and women in the Air Force, or running a branch at a bank leading the people in that endeavor. Somebody hired you because they believed you are good enough so if you don't have confidence in yourself, at least have confidence in them. Then, do the three things that dad pointed out. Work your hardest to do your best every day. Respect everyone that you come into contact with...respect them, their ideas, and their input. Care more than anyone else does about your people, about your job, and about the organization that you are a part of. If you do those things, everything kind of takes care of itself.

**Lindsay:** How long did it take you to appreciate what your dad was saying about those ideas?

**Welsh:** For me, it was after I left the Academy. I was immature when I got there. I was focused on other things besides personal development unfortunately, which I have been very open about. As a result, it slammed doors in my face. There were opportunities that I did not have until later in life because I had not worked hard enough at the Academy and taken advantage of that incredible opportunity. But the idea that you don't have to be the best and you can still accomplish things, I learned that there. I also learned that there are a whole lot of people who also cared like I did about the corny things in life. About pride and patriotism, about faith, family, loyalty, and respect. The things that matter to us individually. I learned when you have a number of individuals who feel the same way, the team tends to embrace those values and that is what I found in the Air Force. I had hoped that I would find that and it was absolutely true. I grew up

in an Air Force family but it is a little bit different being a dependent than it is being in the workplace.

**Lindsay:** With that in mind, if Dean Welsh had the opportunity to go back and talk to Cadet Welsh, what would you tell him?

**Welsh:** Do your best at everything and not just baseball. My problem was that the things I chose to do well, I did well. The things that I wasn't excited about, you need to make sure to work hard at those things too because that is really where you need to develop. I was a very righteous young guy so I was quick to point out flaws in the system from my perspective. I was that way until I was probably a young Captain. I had a couple of bosses early in my career that made me realize that I was kind of an idiot. For me, quite frankly, it didn't come full circle until I was a Squadron Commander. I was standing in the front of the room and I heard "myself" in the back of the room. One of our Lieutenants made a comment in a Squadron meeting and my blood pressure immediately went up, I know I started to turn red and then it hit me. That was me talking. It sounded exactly like me. It was a comment he felt was funny and I didn't. It was kind of a reckoning for me. I think for some of us it takes a while. For others, they intuitively understand that's not the way to do business. It was never a matter of me not trying to do the job right or not working hard or that I didn't respect people, but there was just this idea that I have an idea and I think I'm right. However, I'm not right all the time. I'm just not.

**Lindsay:** Did that realization continue when you came back to be an Air Officer Commanding (AOC) at the Academy?

**Welsh:** I think when I came back as an AOC, one of the advantages that I had was I don't think I had a righteous view of the Academy and of the cadet experience. I had a very strong view that if we were going to have something called a cadet leadership

laboratory then it needs to be one. We need to let cadets win and lose. They needed to fail. My experience as a cadet and one of the reasons I didn't get real involved in part of the experience was that, in my organization, you couldn't fail. There was no trying and not succeeding. If you started to not succeed, the AOC would take over and you'd be told what to do and how to do it. So, it was very hard to try your style because everyone was trying to do things his way. Even as a cadet, it let me start writing down these leadership lessons that I collected over the years. One of the lessons was to do your job your way. Give it your style and your personality. Trust your gut. Don't try to be someone else. You won't succeed in the job that way. The people who were overseeing my Squadron when I was a cadet didn't believe that. It made me mad, quite frankly, so I turned it off. That was not the right answer and it was an immature answer instead of trying to work through it, but that was my approach at the time. I was taught better than that later when I found that if I disagreed with commanders in the Air Force they would let me sit down and tell them why, and then they would tell me why my righteous approach was not the right answer either. Maybe there was a solution in the middle that we could both work toward. That was a big lesson for me and I had learned that before I came back to the Academy as an AOC.

**Lindsay:** That ability to fail forward or fail for development is a difficult concept for some to grasp when they are used to a performance and results driven environment. To step into a developmental opportunity where it is okay to provide a context where cadets can take risks and sometimes fail, like that of an AOC, challenges quite a few people as they don't want to let go.

**Welsh:** It depends on the model you choose. If you say that we are a leadership lab and cadets are going to run the Wing, then you have to accept some failure. You just do or you are kidding yourself and it's not a leadership lab. I don't know that it is the best model,

by the way. I am of the opinion that about 40 or 50 cadets are trying to do the right thing every semester and the rest are fighting them. The squadron, group, and wing staffs are trying to learn these lessons in this leadership lab and their peers are basically saying, "get out of my face."

I think there is at least some merit to an alternative discussion about how this could work. Let me give you an example of something that you could do differently. You could make the AOC the commander of the cadet squadron. Then, you would teach cadets how to lead within an organization. The person setting the standard and directing the enforcement of the standard would be the AOC. Everybody else in their chain of command would be a cadet officer or NCO. The Academy Military Trainer (AMT) would be like the squadron superintendent. The real command lessons would come at the flight commander and element leader level which is where these young folks are going to come out and get their first leadership experience anyway. When they are at that level, they have a very clear set of standards and guidelines that they are given by their Squadron Commander. It's not like in the Cadet Wing where it is hit or miss depending on who your commanders are. Which lessons do you want them to learn? I believe you want them to learn to follow well, because I believe the best followers usually become the best leaders. I believe that they need structure in the way they try and lead and you can do that with an officer chain with cadets in it as opposed to an all cadet chain of command.

The problem we have now, and I think it has been this way for some time, when we get frustrated with cadet commanders, the people who get frustrated are people who have never tried to oversee 100 people. How many AOCs do you think have previously been flight commanders with 100 people working for them? The same applies to our Group AOCs where they are overseeing 1100 people and have likely never led that many people. So, our Group AOCs and Squadron

AOCs are learning some of the exact same lessons our cadet commanders are learning. They're all great people, but that's not a recipe for success.

The other problem is the cadet squadron commander is trying to demonstrate peer leadership, which is absolutely the hardest kind of leadership that there is. I think if you change the model, you could do other things. I'm a believer that if someone comes to the Air Force Academy, they are not getting ready to be in the Air Force or preparing to be in the Air Force. They are in the Air Force the day they arrive and we should treat them like they are in the Air Force. Once they start their junior year and they accept their commitment, give them the equivalent of an Officer Performance Report their junior and senior year. Leave it in their record until they compete for Major. I believe that a lot of the negative comments they make about this place will go away.

**Lindsay:** That would get rid of the future focused narrative of "once you graduate," or "when you graduate" or "once you are commissioned" instead of a current narrative of thinking about where I am now and the lessons that I could be learning.

**Welsh:** Exactly. You are in. Start performing. Your job is to do well in school, to do well in sports, and to learn about military protocol and leadership. It is to try to be a good squadron academic NCO. That is your job. We are paying you for it. That would start to get rid of the cynicism that we have seen in the Cadet Wing even when I was a cadet. I think the system breeds that to some extent. Now, there are some people who would go crazy if you tried to have something at the Academy that would linger in a record after graduation. I disagree and think it would have the opposite effect and it would make the Academy a better place. You wouldn't be evaluated on how good you are as a flight commander or as a squadron NCO. You would be evaluated on how hard you tried.

**Lindsay:** So, it wouldn't just be about success, but about development.

**Welsh:** It is about development. You gave it your best shot. You did well and you learned a lot.

**Lindsay:** What that could do is build a mentality early on in the cadet that I am a leader first. I am in the Air Force and not just the functional orientation of I am a pilot, an engineer, etc. It builds that development early on that I am an Airman.

**Welsh:** It also starts to build the culture of "we are working together here." We are not fighting each other.

**Lindsay:** It's interesting because we often hold on very tightly to what our own experience was. I am a 1992 graduate of USAFA and my experience then shapes how I think about these things. There are likely graduates out there who think it was great based on their experiences, and others who would be open to a different way if it helps address some of the issues that we know about, like what you addressed in your experience earlier.

**Welsh:** I would start by looking at what have been the criticisms of the Academy over time? One of the criticisms is that the Cadet Wing is cynical. Everybody talks about that. Another one is that Academy grads don't seem hungry when they come out of the Academy. I don't think that is true, by the way. I think there people in every group that act hungry and those that don't. If we can't make the Academy the place where we can make the most prepared and motivated Second Lieutenants, then what are we doing? It will all equalize because there is a ton of talent coming out of ROTC as well. It's not about who is better. I'm talking about who is better prepared and is more acclimated to the culture. The culture of the Air Force is not the cynical "what can we get away with" culture. How do we change that? I am a believer in the Air Force

Academy but I think the Air Force Academy is this shining place on the hill and I want it to shine brighter. I don't know how great it can be, but it can be better than it is now and it is pretty great now.

**Lindsay:** Right. We can always be better and should be pushing ourselves to be better.

**Welsh:** We have to for the Air Force to succeed. I just don't think we should have a different environment at the Academy than we do anywhere else. You are in the Air Force. Let's get you ready to lead. That is why you are there. You are not there to learn how to behave or how to accept responsibility. You are going to get all that but it is not the primary focus. Think about commitment day the first day of your junior year. You make the commitment to come back. I think there is a flip side to that. I believe the Air Force should be making a commitment to you too. That means not everyone would deserve that commitment. If you can't perform in a way during your freshman and sophomore year that we believe (those at the Academy whose job it is to assess that), that you are motivated and caring about the right things and that you are willing to adapt and assimilate into this culture, then why are we going to pay to have you come back for the next two years?

We are all in once we give an appointment. In what business does that happen? There has to be some assessment on the other side of this. We have a program called aptitude probation which has been linked to conduct probation for some reason. I know, because I was on both. Aptitude probation does not have to be linked to conduct. You can have someone who is perfectly fine on conduct who is not motivated at all to do the things that we believe they should be doing to prepare themselves for being an officer in the Air Force.

If we see that during their freshman or sophomore year, you can put them on aptitude probation.

For example, if they finish their sophomore year on aptitude probation, why are we bringing them back to be a junior? It doesn't mean they are bad people, it just means that maybe this isn't right for them. Or they don't have the tools that we think are required to operate successfully in the Air Force culture. All of that is part of building an Air Force. We stay away from that primarily I think for legal reasons because you would have to take a stand on that. You would have to be willing for at least one year during that transition to have a pretty high drop in retention rate that would grab a lot of attention. But once you show the Cadet Wing that you are serious about this, they will perform

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to the standard that you set. They are like any other 18 to 22 year old in that they will perform to the standard that you set. If you allow them to perform below the line, it is more comfortable down there.

**Lindsay:** If they got away with being below the line and it is okay, then why wouldn't they?

**Welsh:** I did. Quite frankly I did in some areas at the Academy. You can live down there.

**Lindsay:** I appreciate the thoughts to a new mental model about how the cadet squadron could be structured. One of the things that I want the Journal of Character and Leadership Development (JCLD)

to be is a place to introduce new ideas and processes that can lead to further discussion and reflection. The ability to have a forum where new ideas, and sometimes competing ideas, are discussed is important. If we don't have those conversations, then we can hurt our own development individually and organizationally.

Looking a little further down your journey, when you think about your time as Chief of Staff of the Air Force, what are you most proud of, humbled by, and honored to have done?

*I am a big believer in grinding. I like grinders around me. I like people who come to work to go to work, who don't get too high or too low. When it really gets ugly, you know they will be there swinging with you. Because you can trust them when it is tough. In our business, that is really helpful.*

**Welsh:** I think those are three different things. I think the thing I am most proud of is that I tried my best every day. Like everyone else, I have good days and bad days. Some days, I just wasn't good enough and other people would carry me. But, I tried my best every day. If had done anything less than that, I couldn't face myself. I never quit trying. Even on the bad days, I kept swinging. I am a big believer in grinding. I like grinders around me. I like people who come to work to go to work, who don't get too high or too low. When it really gets ugly, you know they will be there swinging with you. Because you can trust them when it is tough. In our business, that is really helpful.

I think I was humbled most by the opportunity to meet Airmen all over the world. The reason that I feel

passionately about the Academy and what we do there is because I believe in cadets. I believe in the men and women who chose to come to the Academy. They are remarkable in every possible way. They get better and better every generation. I feel the same way about our Airmen. They do really difficult work in really difficult places. Despite the occasional grumble, which is everyone's inalienable right, they don't complain. They put up with hardship. They deal with the sacrifice. Their families support them in doing this, which is a remarkable thing to me. They do unbelievable work for the nation and they take care of each other. I came

into the Air Force because I was in love with the airplanes and I stayed in because I fell in love with the people. I was humbled every time I met a new Airman. I just didn't feel worthy of them. They are remarkable.

As far as how I felt the most honored, the fact that they would accept me with pride when I showed up was an honor.

The fact that a young Airman would let me take his cell phone and call his mom to tell her I was impressed by him and that we could share that moment. That was an honor. It wasn't a big public thing. It was just me and him. That was an honor. Pulling up a chair in a chow hall in Bagram or Kabul or some strange place around the world and having people actually excited to see you there so they could talk to you about the Air Force. That was an honor. Anytime I had the chance to represent them in any forum whether it was a Congressional Hearing or event in D.C., it didn't matter, I was representing the people that I admired more than anyone else in the world.

**Lindsay:** In listening to you talk about trying your best every day, it seems like you still care about your personal development, even as successful as you have

been. You talk about doing your best, working hard, and caring about people. That is a developmental mindset. What does your development look like now?

**Welsh:** I think the biggest thing is to not let yourself get comfortable in your profession. In the Air Force, there are opportunities as you go through to go back to where you are comfortable. You can go back to a unit that flies the airplane you flew before or go to a base that you have been to before. I tried not to do that because I wanted to learn as much as I could about all parts of the Air Force. I wanted to fly different kinds of airplanes and I wanted to meet different kinds of people. So, I think you can challenge yourself and look for breadth in your professional development.

When I was the Chief of Staff, there were articles written about, "...well, there's another fighter pilot as the Chief of Staff." The truth is, I hadn't been a fighter pilot since 1998. I spent more time in the intelligence community at that point than I had flying fighters. You really have chance to broaden yourself in so many different ways over the course of your career and I think you should. It gives you a different perspective and over time it gives you more opportunity.

So, first of all, don't let yourself get comfortable professionally. By the way, after I retired, I kind of did the same thing. I jumped into an arena that I know nothing about. I'm three years into the job of being the Dean of The Bush School of Government and Public Service at Texas A&M University and I really have no clue what I am doing. I'm learning every day from the people that are here and I'm not afraid to ask questions. I know that I'm not great so I keep working to get better. I just think it's kind of a professional lifestyle. As a result, I learn more than I would have otherwise. I didn't understand the educational Academy (not the Air Force Academy) at all. It is a fascinating place with a whole new group of fascinating people, albeit a very different culture. It has been really interesting and

challenging for me. It keeps Betty and me young and it makes us feel like we matter. To me, it is a way of life. My dad was that way. My mom was that way, so I guess I was really lucky that I grew up in an environment where I was encouraged to try new things. Failure wasn't a problem. You are going to do it and get through it and we will love you anyway. I was really blessed to have that and I have a wife who is the greatest human being ever born. She tolerates all this and supports me in it, helps me learn and corrects me when I am being stupid. I'm just a lucky guy.

**Lindsay:** You mentioned being in a new domain. Why did you choose academics in Texas over other opportunities like business or nonprofit?

**Welsh:** Texas was easy. I was born in San Antonio and Texas has always been home. I love Texas. It's the greatest place in the world because of the people. They are proud, they care, and take care of each other. So, I always knew I was coming back to Texas. My wife is from Long Island but she's a convert. It also doesn't hurt that our kids and grandkids are here to help convert her. We knew we were coming back to Texas, but we didn't know where. I wasn't really planning on working full time. I was planning on grandfathering full time because we spent so much time away from family that I wanted to reconnect.

About six months before I retired, I got a call from someone here at Texas A&M who asked if I would be interested in putting my name in the hat for this particular job as the Dean. That made me think back in the 90s some time where I had given a speech and somehow it ended up in the Wall Street Journal. President George H.W. Bush read it and wrote me a letter. I think I was a Lieutenant Colonel at the time and I remember getting this letter and thinking, why would a former President write me a letter? I was astonished by that. I found out later that he wrote thousands of them. So, I really wasn't that special, but

I sure felt special when I got it. That letter has been framed and in my office ever since. It was clearly him writing it because it was a personal letter. I just really appreciated the fact that he sent it. Then, a few years later, I heard him being interviewed on TV about this new College at Texas A&M in his name that had been established when he built his Presidential Library here. I remember him talking about public service and how this College would produce public servants and his views of public service as a noble calling. I remember thinking that is a great hook for a school.

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That is the last I had heard about it until I got that phone call. I thought well, I should probably leave my name in the hat for a bit and that is what I did. I got into the application and interview processes and eventually came to visit as one of the finalists and met the students. They are just like cadets at the Academy, except a little older. They come here because they want to serve. That is the comparative advantage to the Bush School. It is a graduate school. Some of them come here knowing exactly how they want to serve. They want to be the President, the Secretary of State, they want to be in the intelligence community, or they want to be a city manager. They just want to serve. For two years, they share and magnify that in each other, and then about 70% of them actually go into public service which is a remarkable number.

I fell in love with them just like I fell in love with Airmen. Then I really wanted the job and was astonished but very privileged to get it. I have loved

everything about it. It's a phenomenal opportunity principally because we have the chance to launch these men and women into careers in government and hopefully let them enjoy the same kind of privilege I did of serving. They will take things to a new level. That is what is fun about being here – every day you see the future and you stop worrying about it, just like being at the Academy. The corny stuff matters here too. People at Texas A&M believe in all those things like pride, patriotism, faith, family, loyalty, respect, bravery, courage and honor. We talk about it here. People are proud and they embrace it here. At the Bush School, we have that giant university with that clear servant focus all around us and we have a solid core of service oriented leadership from the faculty and staff. It's just a good place to be. If you have met graduates from Texas A&M, then you know that Aggies love themselves some Aggies ... it's a happy place.

**Lindsay:** With all that, are you still getting a chance to be a grandpa?

**Welsh:** The beauty of it is all of our kids are Aggies and they come back here routinely so we get to see them a lot which is really good.

**Lindsay:** Now having moved into Academia, what have been some of the challenges or surprises of leading in a different type of organization?

**Welsh:** I don't think the leadership challenges and the tools required to be successful are different. I think they are the same. There are some great leaders here at this university. The other Deans, Department Heads, faculty members, and university administrators are exceptional. I would love to work for them and I would follow them anywhere. The biggest adjustments that you have to make is that the culture is different for understandable reasons. It's just like inside the



Department of Defense where there are reasons why the Army is different than the Air Force. They are functionally based reasons but they create different cultures over time. That isn't bad, it's just the way that it is. It's important to understand the cultures of all the different organizations in the Department of Defense if you are going to succeed in the military. It takes a while to learn them and you need to be open to understanding that other organizations aren't evil, they are just different and there is a reason for the difference. The same thing is true within universities. It is a bureaucracy, but the bureaucracy is composed of the types of things that educators need to be really good at. For example, you write a lot for performance evaluations and for recommendations for promotion or awards, but people are used to researching and writing a lot. That is the way they want to assess performance, behavior and compare accomplishments. There isn't much verbal assessment happening there as it is mostly written but that is part of the culture.

The concept of shared governance is huge in the academic academy. To some members of the faculty that means that everyone has veto authority. Of course, that is not what shared governance means, but that is how some interpret it. You have to understand that because you have to communicate in a fairly comprehensive way and you will still probably be criticized for not asking their opinion enough.

The same thing is true in the military. Anyone who thinks that the United States military doesn't operate under a program of shared governance just doesn't know it. If you are going to walk into a room of fighter or bomber pilots, or of Navy Seals, Army Rangers, or Marine Raiders and tell them we are going to go risk their life and here is what we are doing so get in line, you are kidding yourself. They want a vote in how you are going to do that. They know what they are doing and they want to be part of the planning. In shared governance, the difference in the military is that it is really clear that at some point someone has to make

a decision. Sometimes in the academic academy the preference is for no decision because that way everyone will remain unaffected. You have to figure out how to get past that. But, the people are great and there is a terrifyingly high level of understanding of context and fact surrounding any issue or event.

In our school, you have the real benefit of combining a group of great Professors of Practice with tremendous experience in the real world of government and national security with scholars who bring an unbelievable context to the discussion of every issue that affects governance and national security. Our students benefit from that immensely. It has been a fascinating experience for me. Once again, I'm in a place where I'm not the best at anything so I am very comfortable.

**Lindsay:** Any regrets?

**Welsh:** Not at all. As you leave any career field, you have to determine what your priorities are and for us it was location, because of family, and secondly it was having an anchor and something to commit to because Betty and I both need that. The idea of consulting, traveling a lot, and making a lot of money wasn't appealing. I don't need a lot of money because I don't know how to spend it. The military retirement is great and I don't know how we would spend more anyway. We have enough to take care of ourselves, take care of our family, and really enjoy life right now. We are happy.

**Lindsay:** As we wrap up our conversation, is there any closing advice you have for new leaders.

**Welsh:** I would go back to the things that my dad told me because over time I came to realize the advice he told me was gold. The first thing is trust yourself and be confident. There is a reason you are where you are. Do your best and that is going to be good enough for everybody else.

The second thing is to do your best every day. Try your hardest. The whole system is set up to make you successful. Everyone wants you to be great. That is true at the Academy, as well as when you head out into the bigger Air Force, for the officers around you and the enlisted members who work for you. They all want you to be great because that is what is best for them. Just do your best and let them help you get there.

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The next thing is to care. I mean care enough that it hurts sometimes. If things go wrong and it doesn't really bother you, if someone working for you doesn't get the opportunity you think they deserve and it doesn't eat at you, in our business if somebody gets hurt or killed and that doesn't just rip you apart, if you don't care that much then you aren't caring enough. Pain as a leader is not a bad thing. Sometimes leadership is going to hurt. Sometimes is it going to hurt really, really bad, but you aren't doing it right if it doesn't hurt.

Finally, respect everyone and learn from all of them. Young Airmen will teach you things that will just astonish you. Sometimes the people who are supposed to be the great guru on the mountain really aren't helping you that much. Sometimes an 18-year old right out of technical school will say something and stop you in your tracks. Listen to everyone and respect their view. Make sure you create an environment around you where everybody's input and contributions matter.

Where everyone feels critically important and where diversity is a strength and inclusion is an imperative. You control the world around you; make it that kind of a world. I think you will find over time that other people want to come into that world. Once they do, you will figure out pretty quickly that you don't have to carry the load alone. That is the key. That

is what leadership is about. It is about realizing that leadership by definition is not about you. It can't be about you. It is about the people you are leading and the organization you are trying to move in some direction. If you do those things I mentioned before, you will all be working toward the same goal. Together, Airmen are unstoppable if you have that environment. If you are a young leader, they are going to make you look so much better than you really are. It is remarkably humbling.