

## MILITARY

# The Value of the Journey

Lt Gen Anthony Cotton, USAF, Air University

**Interviewed By: Douglas Lindsay**

**Lindsay:** Would you mind giving a brief overview of your career, lessons you learned along the way, and how you got to where you are today?

**Cotton:** Absolutely. My background with the military started well before I was commissioned. I started as a military dependent. My father was an Air Force Chief Master Sergeant so I tell people that I came out of the womb as a member of the United States Air Force. My dad served in the Air Force for 32 years. I knew from an early age that I enjoyed the Air Force lifestyle and wanted to be a member of the Air Force. It was my father who told me that he wanted me to do things a little bit different than he did. He wanted me to get a college education and join the Air Force as an officer. So, I went into ROTC, was commissioned out of North Carolina State University and started this incredible Air Force journey.

My first assignment was as a missile officer at Minot Air Force Base. I am a Strategic Air Command (SAC) warrior because back in 1986, SAC was still alive and well. I think what I learned there was discipline. Being the son of a Chief Master Sergeant, it wasn't hard to understand that. I was raised by a disciplinarian and SAC was a compliance driven organization. So, young Tony Cotton was a little different than who I am today as far as understanding the tenants of discipline and how you can weave that into other things.

It was circa 1986, Cold War era, Strategic Air Command. I did quite well in that business. As a result, I got the opportunity to be a part of an organization that was by name only. It was called the 3901st Strategic Missile Evaluation Squadron. That was again, a compliance and discipline based organization.

After that, our community merged with the space community. Mentors told me that I did a great job in the intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) business, but I needed to broaden and it would be great to see me tackle this

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**Lieutenant General Anthony Cotton** is the Commander and President of Air University at Maxwell Air Force Base. In that capacity he is responsible for 50,000 resident and 120,000 non-resident students (officer, enlisted, and civilian) every year. Gen Cotton entered the Air Force in 1986 through ROTC at North Carolina State University and earned his Master's Degree from Central Michigan University. He has over 30 years of service to the Air Force where he has served in such positions as missile combat crew commander, executive officer, command operations evaluator, Deputy Director, and command at multiple levels.

new Air Force Specialty Code (AFSC) and this new business called space. I went through a board process and I was picked up to join space. My first assignment was in space control at Cheyenne Mountain Air Station. I did really well there and was subsequently picked to go to the A3, still known as the Director of Operations (DO) in those days, at the Headquarters. I did some work in the vault and was the program element monitor for optical ground systems.

School and other things were interspersed in those journeys as I made my way here to Air Command and Staff College (ACSC). Then, I was blessed enough to get the opportunity to be the Director of Operations for the Range Squadron out at the 45th Space Wing at Patrick AFB/Cape Canaveral and got into the launch business. I fleeted up to a Squadron Commander while there at the 3rd Space Launch Squadron. We launched the Titan IV heavy lift as well as the Atlas IIAS medium lift rockets. I was the Deputy Operations Group Commander before heading off to school. After an opportunity to broaden my perspective at the Army War College for Senior Developmental Education (SDE), I was hired to be the Deputy Director of the Executive Action Group for General T. Michael Moseley and Secretary Michael Wynne at the Pentagon. I did that for a year and was picked up to Colonel early and ended up interviewing for a job at Under Secretary of Defense for Intelligence (USDI) and was hired to be a Director. That was shortly before the transition from former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld to his successor, Secretary William Gates, and I became the senior military assistant to the USDI. I left there and went to the National Reconnaissance Office (NRO) to become an Operations Group Commander at one of their sites. Then, I went back into the missile business by going to Malmstrom Air Force Base and became the Vice Wing Commander and ultimately became the Wing Commander. From there, I went back to space to become the Wing Commander of the 47th Space Wing as a one star. Following that, I became the Deputy Director of the NRO and followed that by going back

to the missile business by being the Commander of 20th Air Force.

That was a unique experience and we can talk about that time post the 2014 cheating scandal in the nuclear enterprise. Commanding the 20th AF was an interesting time because my marching orders were to get this right. I was told that as part of my tenure, I needed to make sure that we can validate some of the changes that we made in the enterprise and did we get it right or do we need to make some tweaks? I was able to sit in that job about 27 months. I was then told that I was going to be able to take some of the things that I learned in the operational field and bring it to Air University. I interviewed for the position with the Secretary of the Air Force and the Chief of Staff of the Air Force and here I am.

**Lindsay:** That's quite the journey. I appreciate you sharing that because the journey is important to who we are today and we certainly pick up things along the way. Being able to talk through that helps us to see where we are and how we are shaped by the journey.

**Cotton:** I agree. It is a long journey but it gives you the perspective that I'm not someone who has spent a lot of time in academia. So, why do we have someone with an operational background, albeit in missiles and space, leading the charge with Air University? It gives a little insight as to why senior leaders wanted to put me here at this particular time.

**Lindsay:** It certainly is a bit of a far cry from those early compliance days. How has that transition been from the operational side to a more academic side?

**Cotton:** It was interesting. I think what has really allowed me to grow and see things differently is the fact that I did not spend my entire career in the ICBM business. I think the culture in the ICBM business did not allow people to feel empowered and I would have grown up in that culture the whole time. Being able

to come back, and I'm doing air quotes right now, and "seeing how the other side lives," gave me a different perspective. Especially coming back as the numbered Air Force Commander.

We can talk about some of the things that I think we missed. I think we had a community in the ICBM business, that was so compliance based, not that that discipline is bad, but compliance to the point that everything was compliance based. It is a little bit simpler to just put that nomenclature over everything. You look at the previous 45 years where this community just grew people who were compliance based. At the end of that, you slap the table and say that we need to fix this and we need to empower people. The first thing that I recognized when I took over was the fact that empowerment is just a word if you have never had it before. To tell someone that you are now empowered to do things, if they don't know what that term means, means absolutely nothing. You are setting people up for failure and not success.

We were using the right words, but we were using words, techniques, methods, and modalities that were foreign to our culture. To get folks to buy in was going to be a longer journey than just saying, "Hey, we messed

this up and we should have empowered you, let's now do that." I'll give you a good example. If something is going on in the field and the crew members can make the decision on their own because there are two officers in charge of the flight, will the two officers make the decision? Or, will the two officers think that what they should do is go up the chain to make sure that the decision they are making is the right one? That is culturally driven. By mandating and saying, I'm sending you out to the field to make decisions that are absolutely appropriate for a Captain or Major to make at your level, you should be able to do that. Then, come

to find out that early in my tenure, they are still not doing that. It was because they weren't comfortable with that and were never given the opportunity to do that in the past. Having a 2-star general telling them it was okay to do that now wasn't really good enough.

**Lindsay:** Because they had years of experience telling them the exact opposite?

**Cotton:** Absolutely. From a leadership perspective, I think if my journey wasn't as broad, I probably would have been comfortable with them still going up the chain. But, it did bother me. I had left the career field and gone to the space community where there was a little less structure about being able to do that and then on to the intelligence world where you often don't have the time to do that and go through all of the wickets. Being able to see it from a different perspective based on my experience was critical. Things like having the opportunity to talk to the rated community where we would probably think they would say the same thing, is absolutely untrue. The empowerment really is given

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to the individual. Being able to see that first hand and being able to articulate how to train people and trust people. I think that is key that we trust them. It was something that took me a little while and I didn't recognize right away in my journey that I was going to have to overcome that for the community before we could move on to the next steps. By the time I left there, I think we got to a pretty good place where that was happening.

I often say that any time you make a drastic change in a culture, you have three groups of people. I call

them the “Befores, Durings, and Afters”. You have the folks that have come in after the change and I call these the 2nd Lieutenants. They say, “What are you talking about? This is great and I love what you are doing.” You have the durings who are actually going to see the transition. I will tell you, and the Chief of Staff and I were talking about this just yesterday, you have those that will be part of the transition and to be frank, you will maybe get 60 percent of them. Then, you will have the befores and those are the folks that remember the way it was when Tony Cotton was a 2nd Lieutenant under SAC and anything pre- 2014. They themselves grew up in the business, they may have left the business for a while and now it is time for them to come back. The only thing they remember when they come back is the way it was 15 or 20 years ago. They are not willing to accept change and that things are different. Those are the ones that you almost have to say, it was nice having you part of the team, but we don’t need you to be part of the team any more. We will find you something else to do because you might be of service in other things but I don’t need you here to make us go backwards. Part of that is because they weren’t part of the journey of change and they are walking into the situation without having seen that the change was important, relevant, and needed to happen.

**Lindsay:** As I hear that, I see so many parallels to the organizational change process. There is a time element and we always want change to happen quicker than it does. There is also a parallel with leader development where it is a process that is going to take time. I think that is one of nice aspects of the Air University system where you have multiple touch points on both the officer and enlisted sides throughout their careers. There is an intentional system to help people through the developmental process.

**Cotton:** You are absolutely right, Doug. We are tackling it here like you are at the Center for Character and Leadership Development Center (CCLD). One of the things that we noticed right away, and that is why

we created the Leader Development Course in the post Captain time but before you head into Intermediate Developmental Education (IDE), is that there is a little void there in the continuum. The course really concentrates on the soft skills and topics like emotional intelligence, focusing on a person’s blind spots, and understanding the blind spots of others as a person assumes more leadership. It is one of the things we spend a lot of time on.

I use vignettes when I talk to people because it is something that I saw real time as a numbered Air Force Commander and as a Wing Commander, in terms of how you develop people, and how you get people to understand the soft skills of leadership as well as the hard point skills and processes. I talk to every class of Squadron Officer School (SOS) and you get the head nods. When I go into a vignette or discuss a dilemma, you see them shaking their heads and saying, “I have seen that.” That always tells someone like you or I that we have work to do.

One vignette that I love sharing is when you have a young Airman that walks up to you and has a conversation with you and you spend time getting to know that Airman. Then, I’m approached by someone who just wants to shake my hand, have a conversation with me, and let me know who they are. When that person walks away, I look at the young Airman and say, “Wasn’t that your Squadron Commander?” The young Airman says, “Yes Sir.” I usually then turn the vignette and say, “Wouldn’t it have been nice if that Squadron Commander would have introduced me to his Airman?” Wouldn’t it have been nice for him to say, “Hey Sir, I see you just met Airman Smith. He is one of my troops, been here eight months, just been certified, and has his girlfriend coming up to visit in a couple of weeks.” But, instead of that, you get the Lieutenant Colonel that just wants to shake my hand and then walks off. I literally spent 2 ½ minutes talking to that young Airman. So, how is it that we can grow folks that wouldn’t think enough to spend 2 ½ minutes to look

and see that I'm talking to one of their troops, for them to do the introduction, and for them to understand what that means to that young Airman for them to acknowledge that he/she is part of your team? That is the soft skills type of thing that I am talking about. We need to make sure that people understand that there is something about compassionate leadership.

When I was a squadron commander, I did not just want to identify a problem to my boss. I always wanted to be able to identify a problem and be able to give them a couple of courses of action (CoAs) and say, "Sir/Ma'am, this is how I think I can get after it." What I've seen, as of late, young squadron and group commanders think that their job is to identify the problem, not to help fix the condition. Are you seeing anything out there in the literature about what may have changed?

**Lindsay:** I would say it goes back to a couple of things that you said. The first is the culture that we have in terms of people feeling like they can't fail and having a perfection mentality. If I allow you as a junior commander to fail, I may think that I am putting my own reputation at risk by possibly not being the top commander or the top organization. To the degree that they are rewarded on performance versus development, it creates an interesting pull for the individual between those choices. If it is a choice between looking good versus developing others, individuals are more likely to opt for the former than the latter because that is what they are rewarded on. By having the senior commander make the decision, then they are hedging their bet on not failing.

**Cotton:** Which is one of the reasons why we would really want to incorporate the officer performance system and make modifications to capture some of that. It's interesting as we have rolled out our first year of the Leadership Development Course, some of our senior mentors have briefed me that their biggest concern is the reaction that they get from the attendees of the course that honestly believe, and it goes back

to what you just said, is that it is a one mistake Air Force. So, why take my chances and expose a possible shortfall? There has been more than one of our senior mentors that have come back to me to say that it is a little concerning that our next generation of leaders at the Maj (O4) and Lt Col (O5) ranks see it as an issue.

**Lindsay:** I think it also goes beyond that it is perceived as a one mistake Air Force. A one mistake Air Force follows the notion of "I cannot fail." It seems deeper than that of not just not failing, but that I have to be excellent at everything. So, it's not good enough that I'm not making mistakes, but that I have to be the best every time or it's seen as a failure. It is a performance mentality and not a developmental mentality. A performance mentality that I must have a certain stratification or ranking or it is seen as failure. It gets to an all or nothing type of mentality.

**Cotton:** I agree. How do you have that conversation? When I speak to Company Grade Officers (CGOs), they tell me, "We believe that you believe. We believe that all senior leaders believe that certain things are happening at the lower ranks." They also say that, "We believe that you honestly believe that people can make mistakes and it isn't going to be a problem, to fail forward, and let's learn from our mistakes." Of course, it depends on the level of the mistake and whether it is nefarious or not. They tell me that "...there is a level below you that makes it so that you will never see the ramifications that truly happen to us at that level." As a senior officer in the Air Force, it saddens me to hear that we still have to make it so that people believe you can still take that risk and not be risk adverse about moving forward. I honestly believe for us to continue to be the world's greatest Air Force, we need to be able to have our folks understand that they can take those risks. The things that I get out of them, the ideas, and the "Hey that sounds great, let's give it a try and see what happens," is absolutely incredible and I know you see the exact same there at USAFA.

**Lindsay:** In your perspective, what are some of the things that will help us move the needle on that and close the gap? Is it more collaboration between our organizations?

**Cotton:** I believe so. Air University owns 85% of officer accessions. We are having those conversations with regard to things like, do we spend more time at ROTC to enable conversations and development? So, when you become a commissioned officer as a 2nd Lieutenant, we would have already closed that gap a little bit for the field graders and company graders with SOS by modifying our curriculum. Which we have done, by the way.

I think if we wait until senior developmental education (SDE) when you are a Lieutenant Colonel or Colonel select, it is too late. How many times have you heard something like, the way I act and the way I believe has gotten me this far and you are calling me a high potential officer, I am not changing now. I think it is something that we have to inculcate in all of our training and education programs. I don't think there is ever a time where we shouldn't have some lessons on leadership. But, it's more than leadership theory. I really like the modality that we use of vignettes because it really gets people to open up and think differently than simple PowerPoint delivery methods.

**Lindsay:** It helps them to start to see themselves as leaders early on. I think one of the things that most organizations struggle with is that people start to see themselves more as a skilled individual like a pilot, an engineer, in those types of divisions versus thinking of themselves in a larger context as a leader. Instead, they can think that I may have a certain capability or skill, but I take on more of a leader identity. I really am a leader first, but I also have competency in other areas.

**Cotton:** Right. How you engage that conversation and that thought process is what we are thinking through right now and ensuring that we do that from

all the access points that we have and through all the modalities that we use. We can do it with Junior ROTC, but it's in ROTC when we know that those individuals are going to turn into future officers of the Air Force that we really start having that conversation and curriculum that revolves around those ideas. It begins there and then hopefully continues in your unit and then gets more robust in SOS. We actually spend quite a bit of time in SOS on leadership.

That is why the Chief of Staff asked us to create another learning opportunity between SOS and IDE to allow people to be "reintroduced" in the tenets of leadership. But, it shouldn't be something that is robotic. What you really want is when someone goes to the field, they take it on as their own as a squadron commander or operations officer. There is a deliverable that the young Major Cotton can use when he is an operations officer with a flight where he can discuss and talk about leadership tenets through vignettes. It keeps people sharp on understanding all the tenets of leadership not just something out of a textbook.

**Lindsay:** To your earlier point, I think the way we get there is to model that. For example, I noticed in your bio that you have a lot of different courses and programs that you have done for your own development. When people see senior leaders still working on their development and being open to learning and growing, even though they are successful, it is a powerful message.

**Cotton:** We talk about leadership development, but it's also about character development. The Chief of Staff was just with our AU faculty yesterday and he said, "How many folks out there think they are done with their character development? If that's the case, I want to see you afterwards." You constantly develop character. One of the things you want to do though, is make sure there is a baseline of what our expectation is on character as we grow someone as a leader in our Air Force.

For me, it really comes down to four C's. When I see someone in the Air Force, I ask are you *competent* in your task and are you *competent* in the things that you are given to do? Are you *committed* to being *competent*? Do you show *composure* in getting after what you need to do? The one that I think is more important is do you show *compassion*? I always caveat that because some people tend to misunderstand compassionate leadership with the fact that you need to hold people accountable. I consider myself a compassionate leader but I sure hold people accountable as well. As an example, let's say that there is a military member that may be slightly below the requirements for the Exceptional Family Member Program. They are getting ready to be PCS'd<sup>1</sup> and as a result, the family will have to travel 90 miles to get to a medical referral appointment. Are you that leader that says, hey, there is really nothing that I can do about that because the Air Force Instruction says it is still within the minimum requirements? Or, is that just the beginning of the conversation where you pick up the phone and have a conversation with someone and ask if this is really what we want to do? I think that resonates with Airmen when you can put it in that context so they can understand what you are really asking them to do. I don't see that as an extra step. To me, that is common sense but to others, it may not be. How do you help them grow so that they can react to something like that in a similar way?

Being competent. Being committed. Having composure. Being compassionate. To me, those are my leadership pillars that I have been articulating for over a dozen years now.

**Lindsay:** With those four pillars in mind, what advice would you have for young leaders in terms of

<sup>1</sup> Permanent Change of Station indicates an Airman and his/her family are moving to a new base or assignment.

what they need to be thinking about as they progress in their careers?

**Cotton:** I would go back to the four C's a bit. I think you need to be credible and being credible depends on where you are in life. For a 2nd Lieutenant to be credible, you need to go into a unit and be the best at what you can be at whatever task the unit gives you. For me, that is the competence piece. You are going to be the best that you can be and people see that you are committed to being the best that you can be. I think those two pillars are very important, even for me. Let's

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take Tony Cotton as an example. I can just imagine people saying, why the heck is Cotton, a space and missiles guy, coming to Air University to run the place? Look at his bio. He has been an operator his entire time. While I absolutely am not looking for someone to like me, you still want to be able to garner respect from your unit. I think garnering respect from your unit is having credibility with the unit. So, I could have very well said, "I could care less about this stuff. I am going to run this place like I would any operational unit," knowing that would get me absolutely nothing. Or, I could really dive in and understand different aspects of what they do, learn what they do and gain a respect through the credibility of knowing how the mission works. That is hard work. That is the commitment of becoming competent in your job. I think that it is critically important to do that. I would tell anyone to be competent, as that garners credibility. By having credibility and being competent in your task, and I

always throw composure in there, as you are less likely to unravel if something goes wrong. By the way, people are looking at you to you to make sure you do that. There are followers that are going to be looking at you to see how you react.

**Lindsay:** That's great advice. One final question. What do you want your legacy to be when you move on from your position as the leader of Air University?

**Cotton:** When I came here, the vision that I shared with the Chief of Staff, and also the Secretary of the Air Force, was that I wanted Air University to be seen by our Air Force as a pinnacle and flagship institution. It is sad to say that I think we are the only service that doesn't see our own service school as a flagship institution. He said, "That makes sense." I went on to share that the way we do that is to make sure that we have a first class faculty. I need to make sure we have a curriculum that is agile and relevant to the National Defense Strategy. I need to make sure that we can enable our faculty to do research. I need to expand our outreach so that reach can extend to other Tier I institutions across the nation. If I can get after those things, we as the Air Force will better recognize that Air University is a flagship institution. We will not have to convince ourselves of that as it is right in front of our faces. The Chief of Staff and the former Secretary of the Air Force have been masterful at helping me do that.

One of the things that I recognized is that our own senior leaders don't even know what Air University offers. So, the Chief of Staff fixed that by directing all Wing Commanders to come here for a day and a half visit so that they can see the entire portfolio and not just what they thought they knew about Air University. Let's be frank. People will remember their experience by the last time that they were here. For some, the last time they were here was when they were a captain at SOS 20 years ago. It has certainly changed from what it was 20 years ago. The curriculum has changed and a

lot of people don't realize that. So, they come here and all leave saying, "I had no idea that what Air University offers." Working with Lieutenant General Silveria is a good example. There was never a formal relationship between Air University and USAFA. Between Gen Silveria and I, we signed a Memorandum of Understanding to formally recognize that relationship between the undergraduate institution known as USAFA and the Master's and Ph.D. programs that are nested under Air University. It is hard to believe that there was never a formal relationship there.

From the accessions piece, I want to make sure that we are doing everything that we can do to make sure that we are looking at all aspects of diversity and inclusion as we move forward. We want to make sure that we are capturing the right men and women from universities to join us through ROTC as well as through Officer Training School (OTS). We are spending more time looking at that and understanding those dynamics.

Finally, 2019 is the year of professional military education and continuing education for our enlisted force. A large number of our Airmen go through the Barnes Center for Enlisted Education. I just want to make sure that we are providing first-rate, flagship level education for our enlisted force across the continuum from Airman Leadership School all the way up to the Chief's Leadership Course. We have been diving into that all year to make sure that we are doing that correctly.

I think if I can leave here and people say, AU spent a lot of time ensuring that we got enlisted education right. That AU spent a lot of time to make sure that the curriculum, courseware, and the leadership pieces are in line with the National Defense Strategy and Joint Integration and really spent a lot of time in leadership development and developing the next generation of enlisted and officers correctly. If we can get our customers, the AF enterprise, to see those changes, I will call that a win.