

MILITARY

The Way Things Were Meant To Be

Gina Grosso, Lt Gen (Retired), USAF

Interviewed By: Douglas Lindsay

Lindsay: Would you mind walking us through your background of how you got to where you are today and any lessons learned along the way?

Grosso: I certainly never expected to be where I landed. I'm guessing that is many people's experience. I am the daughter of a World War II veteran and a mother who earned her Ph.D. when she was 55. As I look back, it influences you indirectly in ways that you don't understand until you have time to reflect. I brought up the Ph.D. because right after my mother married my father, and she is 18-years younger than my dad, he went to Viet Nam for the first time in 1961 to 1963. My mother was initially left at home and then a couple of months later, he was able to bring her over there. So, she left college to get married and then go to Viet Nam. For me, if I had left college for any reason, my mother would have killed me. That was never an option.

When I was in the 5th grade, she went back to school because that was important to her. So, watching her, I saw how important finishing her Bachelor's degree was to her. Then, I saw my dad in the Air Force who was later in his career because he started his family in his 40's and was really happy. So, when I was looking to go to college, I decided that I was going to go to one of five private schools which were insanely expensive. So, I ended up applying to every Service ROTC scholarship because I saw my dad who was happy and I thought, I can do that for four years. Honestly, it was not my plan to stay. My plan was to get an MBA immediately and somehow be a corporate mogul.

Gina M. Grosso (Lieutenant General, USAF, Retired) served in the United States Air Force for 32 years culminating as the Deputy Chief of Staff for Manpower, Personnel and Service at Headquarters U.S. Air Force. She earned her Bachelor's Degree through ROTC at Carnegie-Mellon University and her Master's Degree in Business Administration through the College of William and Mary. A career personnel officer, she has held numerous command positions at the flight, squadron, group, and wing levels as well as being the Director of the Air Force Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Office in Washington, D.C.

However, sometimes life sort of intervenes and the first thing that happened was that I did not get into the college that I really wanted to go to. I applied to five and got into four. So, like any rational teenager, I told my mom I wasn't going to college. In her wisdom, she sent me to an education counsellor. He looked at my background, and the fact that I wanted to be an electrical engineer, and said you should go to Carnegie Mellon, which I had never heard of. Somehow, he sent my stuff there and in July, they admitted me. My dad and I drove out there and I thought Pittsburgh isn't too bad. So, my plan was to stay there for a year and then reapply to the school I thought I should be in. I had a great year and realized as I started to mature a bit, that this is where I am supposed to be. Even at that age, I realized that things are going to be okay. I realized I probably wasn't meant to go to Princeton. I'm not sure I would have fit in there looking back because my parents weren't massively wealthy and I just had this amazing experience at Carnegie Mellon. I also had an great experience in the cadet corps, because it wasn't that big. So, things happened the way they were meant to be.

Then, I came into the Air Force and immediately got my MBA, like I planned. I really liked what I was doing and I kept getting these incrementally good experiences. I actually started in operations research which is what I got my degree in. During college, I switched majors from electrical engineering to operations research and I'm grateful the Air Force let me do that. I started out at Nellis Air Force Base doing weapons analysis, which I wasn't really that excited about. We were also using data to defend the airspace as the FAA was always trying to take it. I was doing data analytics in a very primitive way, compared to what we do today.

At that time, Major Commands could move Lieutenants. So, I was moved from Nellis to Langley Air Force Base where I was doing people analysis. People were interesting and I like analysis, so it was a

perfect fit. I had a boss who said that I should think about going into personnel, which we called it at the time, because you could do so much more. I stayed at Langley for my longest tour so that I could finish my MBA. The Air Force wasn't too happy about moving someone from an operations research analyst specialty into personnel, but somehow, he made it happen. I tell you that was the best advice I could have ever gotten.

My first real leadership test was as a Flight Commander in a Military Personnel Flight, having never been in one. It was really fun. From there, it was a series of opportunities that you really don't get very often. I just really liked what I was doing, I really liked who I was serving with and I was continually challenged. I was developed as well. I am a lifelong learner so that really appealed to me how the Air Force really takes an interest in your development. The Air Force paid for my undergraduate degree, provided tuition assistance for my MBA, I spent a year at Newport (Naval Command and Staff College) to get a Master's Degree in National Security and Strategic Studies, and then I got to spend a year at Harvard. It culminated at 32 years with me being the Air Force A1 (head of manpower and personnel).

Lindsay: You mentioned that your journey wasn't what you expected. What did you think that journey was going to be and when did you start thinking about the Air Force as a career?

Grosso: It was literally incremental. I was single most of my career, so financially I had a lot of flexibility. They just kept giving me these neat opportunities. I was never at the point where I said, "I'm not so sure about this Air Force gig." It was a, 'you are getting positions that you have never done, so I hope I don't mess it up' kind of thing. So in reflecting, and thinking about what I like to do and what motivates me, it is solving big problems. That is what I like about math. Taking a hard problem and solving it. The challenge of it and

making the world a little better. Taking those things into consideration, you can't beat serving in the Air Force. There was never an aha moment, if that is what you are asking.

Lindsay: I like to ask that question because for many people who are successful like yourself, when they reflect back, there are always detours from where they thought that they were going to be that take them through lessons that create a different path than they may have originally thought.

Grosso: Exactly. I played competitive sports in high school, so I have always been competitive, but it is much more of an internal competitiveness. I just want to do well at what I am given. I also realized that I enjoy switching jobs every two to three years. The Air Force takes care of that for you. Now, being on the other side and having to sell yourself, that is one of the things that I appreciated about the Air Force.

Lindsay: You mentioned finishing up your Air Force career as the Deputy Chief of Staff for Manpower, Personnel and Services. What was that experience like?

Grosso: I was really well prepared for it. I had spent time at a lot of different levels from the flight up to Wing Command and at the Air Staff and Office of Secretary of Defense (OSD). So, I had experience from the tactical to the strategic levels and felt as prepared as anyone could be to help me be successful.

As a younger officer, I spent 5 years at Langley. At the time, I thought Tactical Air Command (TAC) was the center of the universe. I will never forget, one time we had people come in from the Air Staff, and I thought, "Who are these people telling my boss what to do?" So, you realize pretty quickly that you have a lot to learn. That is where my time at OSD was helpful. You get a sense of their challenges. You have all of these

services that want to be independent, but then you have the Office of the Secretary of Defense, and Congress. I had several interactions with Congress and you figure out how to manage those relationships respectfully and be successful. If you don't have that experience, you don't understand how important that is.

Lindsay: How did you manage those relationships?

Grosso: First, you have to have them. Because I had been exposed to them as a Lieutenant Colonel, with some really great mentors who let me go with them, I understood their role. They have a different perspective, but they are good people. You learn early on that just because people see the world a little different, or have different constraints, they aren't bad people. You need to have a relationship with them so that you understand what their interests are, what they will be able to support you with, and what they won't be able to support you with.

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Lindsay: Often, I think people who don't have that experience, get the sense that it can be an adversarial context. But it doesn't sound like that was the case.

Grosso: As an example, when I was the Air Force Sexual Assault Prevention and Response (SAPR) Director, I had a really interesting conversation with Senator Kirsten Gillibrand (U.S. Senator from New York). It was very respectful on both ends. She believed that military prosecutors should be taken out of the equation. I said, even if you really believed that, you wouldn't get a different outcome because it goes back to the data. It's very rare that there is a disagreement. Interestingly, she said that is because you don't train

your prosecutors well enough. She believed that and that gave me insight as to where she was coming from.

Lindsay: If you can understand that perspective, it can really help makes sense of why people often make the decisions that they do.

Grosso: Yes, and it is genuine. She wanted the same thing that I did. We wanted it to stop sexual assault in our ranks. It is a horrible crime. It is devastating to the individual and it is devastating to the mission. We wanted the same thing, but we approached it differently. As time has gone on, and with cases that I have seen, maybe she had a point because we don't have career prosecutors in this crime. Maybe we should, but that is not in my lane. That is in the Judge Advocate General's (JAG) lane. You wonder at some point if you need some specialization versus generalization. That is always a challenge with developing people.

Lindsay: To what degree do we need people to be specialists who are great at their craft and at what level do we help them make the transition to more of a leadership focus? To what degree do we allow people to stay in their specialty versus having them broaden?

Grosso: That is where compensation has been challenging for us. Our structure, which was really built in the 50s and 60s doesn't help us in the force that we have today. Congress has helped in chipping away at that. But you also have the culture piece and you have to slowly figure out how to get that right. Culturally, we tell people, this is the path and you have to take it. So, how we are going to loosen those reigns is really the biggest challenge for the future.

I am currently working at a mid-sized company that just won the contract for Air Force ROTC instructors. There are 38 contract instructors, and these are amazing people. It just begs the question of what are we doing wrong if we won't let them do that in uniform? Some of it is that they are retired and we have eight

Colonels that missed the Air Force and want to come back and give. You can never get that level of talent and experience even if you wanted it in uniform. So you think about it culturally, how should we think about this differently?

For people that want to specialize, especially on the officer side, that is really hard because the system is still designed for up or out. We do have some loosening of this, but for the future how do we get that right? For example, how do we let some people stay a Captain as long as they want and how do you compensate them? The medical world has figured that out a bit. They have paths, but we are going to have to figure that out for line officers. How do you let people progress when they are ready to? I did have several people ask me, I'm doing really well at what I am doing (they were at the Captain and Major level), so why do I have to keep worrying about making the next grade? That is a fair question. If we can figure out mathematically how to get it right, because you always have to know how many people to bring in at the beginning, we ought to. Because you brought them in and trained them and they are really good, why would you not allow them to serve? I think that is the challenge for the future?

Lindsay: Agreed, as many of the degree and training programs are extensive and expensive.

Grosso: Added to that, we also don't have the 20-year cliff any more. So, I think it will take us time to really understand the dynamics of that for the force that is coming in. That might help us with some of this idea of permeability. However, it is hard to model. What I did find interesting was the take rate, during the year to opt in, was significantly lower than was projected by the people that designed it. I'm not sure what that means. Is it that they didn't understand it or they plan to stay?

Lindsay: Are there any indicators as to what that may be?

Grosso: We still need to figure that out. Quite honestly, it surprised me as I thought it would be the other way around. People would want the flexibility. So, what is interesting to me is that maybe the pull to 20 years, the 50% at 20 years, is still appealing. On the other hand, it could be that people didn't understand it or that they were too busy to elect it. It is an interesting question and a great topic for someone to do a paper on like at Air Command and Staff College (ACSC) or a Master's Degree thesis.

Lindsay: It would also be hard to get a good mentor on that topic since no one going before ever had that option. Maybe people are waiting to see what happened.

Grosso: That could be as well. As another example, I had a young operations research analyst and he was brilliant. He figured out his own solution because he believed he could invest better than the government. So he opted in. His intent wasn't to leave, he just thought he could take that money and invest it better.

Lindsay: How are we doing in terms of manning the force? Are we getting the people that we need?

Grosso: It gets back to something that you said earlier in how do you measure it? We have targets and we are meeting those targets. We have been growing the force since 2015. What is interesting from my perspective, is if you look at the end strength of the active component since the time the service was born in 1947, we peaked at about a million plus in the Korean War and we have been getting smaller with just a few blips up until 2015. That mindset is so dramatically different than growing, and I remember thinking as the A1 that we really need to shift our mindset. Everyone has been growing up in a force that has been getting smaller. One of my

Executive Officers had been force shaped 4 times before she was a Lieutenant Colonel. Can you imagine that? This growth mindset has really caused us to rethink a lot of the programs that we have because we aren't trying to push people out, we need to retain talent. We have to keep talent and you need to bring talent in. You can't get to that end strength without both. You have to keep more people than you normally do and you have to bring in more people. From a pure math perspective, we have been able to do both because we are hitting the end strength. My perception, however, is that it is challenging and we certainly haven't hit the diversity that we would like to hit so there is still critical work to be done for the future. It certainly isn't

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for lack of trying. The people that lead that effort are aware of that and are working hard at it. How do you get into those communities? How do you convince parents and influencers that this is a good place to be? There are huge challenges with that. I think the other huge strategic challenge is that the number of young people between the ages of 18-26 that just don't qualify for military service. From what I understand, that percentage is going up and not down.

Lindsay: One thing that is encouraging is the perceived willingness of the service to explore some different ideas regarding retaining talent. Bonuses seem to be the easy one in throwing money at people, but aren't always effective. Instead, what does right

look like versus, like what you mentioned earlier, approaches that were developed decades ago.

Grosso: To your point, we have been somewhat successful in saying that just because it was done to you, doesn't mean it needs to be done that way forever. For a lot of people, it is not money quite frankly. Some of it is stability when you need it, some of it is a follow on assignment that they want, some of it is more control on where they are going and not necessarily that they don't want to go. I think every person and family has their individual set of needs. We are a big enough organization that we can probably accommodate most needs. I wouldn't say all but what we were trying to do with the Talent Marketplace¹ is leverage that. We have a lot of jobs and we have a lot of people, so how can we meet the satisfaction of the individual and of the hiring authority? In an optimization model, we absolutely do that.

The other thing I liked about it was before you make one assignment, you will know where no one wants to go. Then, you can really do some targeted thinking about it. Okay, so we need to understand what it is about X place that is unattractive, and I'll bet we find things that would make people very surprised. So, you get away from all the assumptions about where people want to go and don't want to go. Then, you can have the conversation about what will it take to get this person to go there and can we do it? Some of it will be money, but I would argue that most of it will not be money.

Lindsay: It could be anything from a quality of life issue, to is it a challenging assignment, or am I going to get a growth opportunity out of it?

Grosso: Exactly. It could also be something like a Ph.D. Maybe I want to go to school after this and I want to go teach somewhere. Or, to your point, I was

amazed in ROTC when I got to visit, that almost every student was studying a language. It didn't matter what their primary was in, they were all interested in the world. So, maybe you let them do a more diplomatic mission. The idea of a stovepipe, or this one right path, you do away with that and really value all experiences. The functionals will have different opinions of that I am sure.

Lindsay: As you look back on your time as A1, what were you most proud of that you were able to accomplish or what do you think your legacy was?

Grosso: I don't like the term legacy because it sounds so self-centered. You don't do anything individually, especially in that position. I had so many great leaders under me. It's hard to pick one thing. For example, we were doing some really great work on modernizing the data system so that we could do things like the Talent Marketplace. I even understand we have an app that is about ready to come out.

Honestly, not as a 3-star, but as a 2-star, I was really proud of doing our first evidence based sexual assault prevention strategy. If you remember back in 2003, we did a lot of things right. We stood up Sexual Assault Response Coordinators (SARCs) really quickly. We stood up victim advocates and were taking care of the aftermath, but we weren't really getting after primary prevention. There are a lot of people in the private sector that study this. It is not about training. Training is not going to get you that primary prevention. I think we really had to shift our thinking. Unfortunately, we still aren't where we need to be on that.

As the A1, I would say laying the foundation for the breaking up of the line of the Air Force competitive category is really important for the future and something I am proud to be a part of. It starts to get at that specialized versus the generalized approach.

¹ The Air Force Talent Marketplace is a web-based talent management and assignment program utilized by the Air Force Personnel Center (AFPC).

Lindsay: Could you talk a little bit more about that?

Grosso: If you think about the line of the Air Force, I think it had basically 70% to 80% of the force under one model or one path, which is crazy. When you look at the skills we have today, some people progress quickly and some people need more time. When you have a system that only rewards one model to get promoted, it absolutely made no sense. That is a really massive change. Ideally, if you started from scratch, you would take skill sets with like paths and you would lump them together so everybody has the same opportunity for the things that are important and the timing is the relatively the same to compete against one another. That is what we tried to do with the categories. We did a lot of work trying to get those categories right. You will never get 100%. We were very comfortable pulling off the lawyers, the doctors, and dentists, these people we don't perceive as primary warfighters. However, when it came to the rest of the force, we were totally okay comparing a cyber operator with a pilot with a maintainer with a logistician, which doesn't really make sense.

In addition, there are some people that are inherently good strategic thinkers that do not always do well at the technical level. There are also people at the tactical level that aren't your strategic thinkers. So, since we had this one path of you need to do Squadron, Group, and then Wing, I'm convinced there are some people that would have really thrived as a General Officer in the strategic arena but would never get there because their strength is not at the tactical level. So, do we really have that right? It makes me think.

Lindsay: With all of this discussion in mind, what does the future Air Force leader look like?

Grosso: You have the bench that you have. That is the other interesting challenge. We have a bench of 5,000-6,000 Colonels and you cull that down to those who will be 1-star. That leap is huge. Once you have

that General (Officer) population, it is what you have to work with. There is no senior level lateral entry. So, it is critical that we get that right.

Also, I wonder if the future of war will be less kinetic. You just wonder what the nature of warfare is going to look like. Is it still going to be humans killing humans or is it going to be systems killing systems? For example, we already have unmanned vehicles and we are still accessing a huge number of pilots. At some point, we will likely need to address the influence of technology as it relates to our accessions. So, these types of things will shape what our future leaders will need to be and the experiences that they need to have to be successful.

When we see things like 5G², exoskeletons, quantum, and our ability to process huge amounts of data, it is a bit hard to predict the future. However, it seems like leaders will need a strong technology base to be effective. Is it an all of government approach? The whole idea of the Space Force has been fascinating. How do we stand it up? Should we stand it up? Who should own it? It has huge ramifications through all of government. I don't think we have a good answer for that yet, as a government.

Today we organize around geography with the Army principally on land, Air Force in air (and now space), and the Navy is sea. If that is the way that we are going to organize, then cyber is difficult to think about with respect to that model. How do you think about organizing your expertise because everything is connected?

In addition, if you think about young people today, they are shaped much differently than you and I were due to the technology and access that they have while they are growing up. They are inherently more technically savvy. Maybe it will be a competency that everyone has.

² 5G cellular network technology is capable of controlling connected machines, objects or devices.

Lindsay: With all of this in mind, what advice would you have for young leaders who are starting out their professional careers regarding leadership and development?

If I do the best that I can, I may not be able to control the outcome, but I am comfortable with what happens. You can't do more than you can do. If you haven't prepared, then that is a different story.

Grosso: I think you have to like what you are doing. If you don't know, then you need to find that out. Have some self-awareness. If you bring your best to what you are asked to do, good things will happen. That is still my philosophy. If I do the best that I can, I may not be able to control the outcome, but I am comfortable with what happens. You can't do more than you can do. If you haven't prepared, then that is a different story. But if you are prepared as best as you can, then the outcome will be what it is. nine times out of 10 is going to be better than you thought.

The other piece of advice is that you don't have to know everything. Almost every job that I was in, I probably knew the least about it. When former Chief of Staff of the Air Force Gen Mark Welsh³ asked me to run the SAPR office, my internal voice was saying,

you are asking a person with a math degree, one in national security, and an MBA who has taken almost no social science to run this program. So, I started to read a lot and I had a great team. I had the opportunity to go down to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and listen to the experts and I learned from

them, and then I hired one of their experts to help us. You don't have to be an expert if you take the people who you have, understand their strengths, find where your gaps are, and if you are fortunate, fill in those holes with talented people.

³ See Page 13 for interview with General Welsh.