

MILITARY

THE OPPORTUNITY TO SERVE

CMSgt JoAnne Bass

Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force

Interviewed By: SMSgt Ecatarina Garcia

Garcia: Congratulations on your new role and thank you for taking the time to sit down with me for a conversation. In a previous interview, you were asked about where you find inspiration. You mentioned that Airmen, and their stories, inspired you. As a leader and the Senior Enlisted member of the Air Force, what items will you focus on to continue to make an impact on the lives of Airmen?

Bass: With respect to what I am going to focus on over the next couple of years, nothing has really changed. I have always had the same focus areas of people, readiness, and culture. However, now I get to codify it. I've always been a person who values people, what they bring to the fight, diversity of thought, diversity of experiences, and the ingenuity that our Airmen have. Being able to focus on people is something that I am super excited to get after as well as impact readiness and the culture. When I think about people, and what they mean to me, that is number one. How do we as an Air Force recruit and retain the best people? That is where my lens is when it comes to people. Then, number two, part of how we retain them has everything to do with people operations. In the civilian sector, they call that HR (Human Resources). I tend to call it people ops. How do we shape the policies, processes, and programs that will cause Airmen, our people, to want to stay in the Air Force?

For the readiness piece, at the end of the day, we are in the Profession of Arms and we have an obligation to our fellow Americans to help defend our country. How can we make sure that we are a ready force that has everything that we need? As an intelligence analyst, you can appreciate the connection that our Airmen need to have with the National Defense Strategy and understanding the why. We have to get Airmen to act in a readiness mindset so that we are ready to get after it. A part of that readiness is our own personal readiness. Are we physically, mentally, and

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fiscally ready to be able to do anything that our Nation calls us to do? I would say for the physical, we need to look at the medical piece. We also need to look at the mental piece and make sure our people are mentally ready to get after things. That also applies to the fiscal piece and making sure they are financially ready.

As for culture, everything relies on culture. I find it interesting when I hear people say, “I can’t wait for Gen Brown and Chief Bass to get after culture.” While we can, from our seat, help influence and share our expectations on the climate and culture of the Air Force, the reality is it is executed at our most common denominator level. So, if the culture within a flight or section isn’t where it needs to be, there isn’t directly anything that Gen Brown or Chief Bass can do about it. We need every Airmen to have ownership in our Air Force and to help us get after the culture piece.

Garcia: With respect to that idea of culture, and since we develop future officers here at USAFA, I’m interested in hearing your perspective of the role that senior enlisted have in developing officers.

Bass: Here is how I would reframe that. I don’t think it is so much of a senior NCO thing. I think it is every NCO’s role to help grow our officers to be the best leaders they can be. When I was a Technical Sergeant stationed at Ramstein Air Base, I remember I had two Majors that were in my section. I used to remind them, “Hey Sirs, part of my job is to help develop you to be the best officer, and one day commander, that you can be and that development starts now. The

last thing you want, is to become a commander and no one is following you because you don’t have the required competencies, character, and attributes that Airmen are willing to follow.” I think our role as NCO’s is to help our officers become the best leaders that they can be. That takes a lot of communication. It takes a lot of tact. It’s a mindset that we need to help develop them to be the next future commanders.

Garcia: Great point. Along those ideas of development and shaping culture, one of the things that just happened was the Air Force releasing its priorities. One of the priorities centered around modernizing the Air and Space Forces. Previously, you have spoken about the challenge of moving at the speed of relevancy. In addition, our National Security documents appear to address this same issue. How as Airmen, can we operationalize the concepts of modernization and innovation in our work centers and in our everyday missions?

Bass: Every single Airman has an opportunity to do that and we all have to actively apply it at each of our levels. When you are part of a section or a flight, there are opportunities all around you to do things. Innovation often gets a bad rap because it tends to be a buzz word, but really it’s not. Innovation is pretty basic. We have been innovating for over 70 years as an Air Force already. So, the reality is that we innovate all the time. As an example, when my husband and I were E-3s and living paycheck to paycheck, we had to go to the Commissary and innovate on how we were going to eat for the next two weeks on a set amount of money in our budget. Airmen are innovating

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all the time. What it means is how can we modernize and how can we innovate the policies and processes in our work centers so they can be better the next time around? More importantly, how can we improve and better our processes so they are good for people who come around in five years or 10 years? That is when we start to hit the goal. I'm fully convinced that a lot of the ideas to help modernize our Air Force start at the tactical level with the Airmen who are getting after it doing our Nation's business. If people are

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waiting for Gen Brown and Chief Bass to modernize the force from our seats, that is not the whole picture. Now strategically speaking, there are some things that we can do to modernize our force and there are some things that only Gen Brown is going to be able to get after when it comes to the broader needs of the Air Force on things like airframes and weapon systems. But, every Airman has a role to play in modernizing the Air Force. It starts in their own duty section, getting after their mission, and making it better for Airmen for years to come. If we have that lens, how great will it be?

I will say that on the enlisted side, I think we have some work that we can do with that end in mind. One thing that I love about our officer corps is that they grow up with that lens, especially our Squadron Commanders. They go in there knowing they need to move the ball and there are things that I need to do for the Squadron in preparation for the next Commander that will take their place. We need to make sure that we have that mindset as enlisted leaders. If I was the NCOIC of a flight records office and I thought that way and had the mindset of let me move the ball on how the flight records office operates for people two or three from now, I think we would be in a better place. We need to be very forward thinking to modernize the force.

Garcia: I appreciate that perspective on the word innovation, and reframing the lens, because I have struggled with that at times. That leads me into another question. What role do you see NCOs and Senior NCOs in ensuring that Airmen are prepared for future conflict?

Bass: I think we have huge role in that, but it starts with us in understanding what that role is ourselves. We can't share with our Airmen what we don't fully understand ourselves. That is why I am pretty tough on our NCO corps because I think they can and should be challenged in a way so that they think differently today than they did 20 years ago. The Air Force of today has to think and operate differently than it did 20 years ago. This is not the Cold War or the traditional uncontested environment. We

have to have NCOs that think from the neck up. We have to understand the strategic global landscape that we are in. We have to completely understand our near-peer and peer competitors and the capabilities that they have. I think if our NCOs and our Senior NCOs truly understood that lens, it would cause them to operate differently. It would make the other things seem not as important. I'm not saying that the other things aren't still important like EPRs, feedback, and 1206s. Those are part of the people ops that I mentioned, and part of our everyday life. But if they really understood the gravity of the situation that we are in and we understood our peer competitors with capabilities that they have, it would cause us to reframe the way we do business. They have to know it themselves in order for them to share why we do what we do for our Airmen.

Garcia: I agree and it makes me think back to the National Defense Strategy where we have no preordained right to victory on the battlefield. That really drove it home for me to start looking at our competitors and our operations. Thinking about something like future conflict is hard to discuss if we don't have the same lexicon.

My next question is near and dear to my heart. A lot of attention has been paid to you being the first female

selected as the Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force. In your Change of Responsibilities Ceremony, you made some moving remarks where you not only showed appreciation for the women that came before you, but you also indicated that it was a historic moment for individuals who may have never been able to see themselves as the CMSAF or CSAF. I was wondering if you could reflect a little bit about what it means to be the first female Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force?

Bass: Truthfully speaking, it's not lost on me that I am the first female Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force and the first female Senior Enlisted Leader of any Service. It is an honor and it is very humbling and it is not lost on me that the title alone makes me a role model for lots of folks. Whether that be young women, little girls, and even men across our Services have reached out to me to tell me that they are inspired by that. To that end, it is truly humbling. What I will be most excited about is when we have gotten to a point in our Air Force where people are not described by being a first, second, or third but that it is just normal ops. That it is Chief Master Sergeant Jo Bass and not the first female. That is when we will, in my mind, have arrived. The opportunity to be that first, so that there can be a second, third, and fourth, is very exciting to be a part of.

Garcia: We have seen a lot of struggles in 2020. But I think it has also showed a lot of things that we can do that we may have previously not thought that we could before. In a previous interview, you mentioned that you are never too old to learn. Specifically, you indicated who you are today pales in comparison of who you will be years from now. Today's environment of COVID has challenged us to do new things and learn new ways of doing our mission. For example, here at the Air Force Academy, that meant putting a lot of our curriculum online. As a Senior Leader, who understands the array of Air Force missions, what do you think are the major takeaways from operating in such a unique moment in time?

Bass: What 2020 has showed us, whether it was through the pandemic or civil unrest, is that we can still fight through it. There is nothing that we cannot do through a unified team together. When it comes to fighting through those challenges, we had to learn to operate our mission sets a little bit differently. The COVID environment has caused us to be able to move out and get after our mission without going through the 18-months that it would normally take to make a change for a single process. That is a win. It showed us that we don't actually need to have 10 people sign off on how we move out on these things.

We can actually take the smart risk ourselves and make changes. From an Air Education & Training Command (AETC) lens, that is huge. We have been able to move out and continue to train and develop our Airmen. We can make changes in hours or days instead of months or years. For the things that we have done to effectively get after our mission in the COVID environment, if we are doing it better, we should never want to go back to the pre-COVID days. However, if there are things that we have to do to be able to get after training and it is not ideal in the way that we are doing it now, then we go back or tweak to the way it needs to be. With challenge, always comes great opportunity. It has given us the opportunity to improve. To what you said earlier, to move at the speed of relevancy. It's not about waiting until we can go back to the pre-COVID days. Those days are gone. We should be capturing right now, what are some of the things that we will never go back to because we have learned to do them better and faster?

Garcia: COVID has been terrible, but I agree that there have also been some opportunities that we need to capture.

Bass: Again, there are certainly things that we are working through that I'm not sure are ideal. For instance, look at Professional Military Education (PME) today and doing PME in the virtual environment. There is a lot to be said about face to face engagements with people and there is a lot to be gained from that. We may not have

to go back to the way we did it before, but maybe there is a hybrid version or a better way to do it. We owe it to our Air Force to examine that. It gets back to modernizing our force. We have an opportunity to modernize our force for the good. So, what does it need to look like? This also gives us an opportunity to think unconstrained, which is a hard thing to do for people who have been doing this for a really long time. I would offer that we should not have any limitations on what does X, Y, and Z need to look like. What does your classroom need to look like? What should training for the defenders look like when we can think unconstrained? I think we get to modernizing the force that we need.

Garcia: It is difficult to think unconstrained when we have all grown up in a constrained environment. With the current environment, things that may have previously been dismissed, now become potential possibilities. One of the things that you touched on earlier was civil unrest and social justice. How do you think these events will have impact the Air and Space Forces moving forward?

Bass: They certainly will. Any time there are challenges that plague our nation, they undoubtedly affect our Service. We are a volunteer force where all of our Airmen come from communities all over our Nation. When things are impacting our Nation like social justice, or in this case, injustice, it impacts us as Airmen. We have moms, dads, sisters, brothers, cousins, etc. out there living that life. So, it is heartbreaking to see our Nation going through this situation. But it is a reality that we have to be able to talk about it as Airmen and as brothers and sisters in arms so that we can overcome and we can continue to stay on the path that our Air Force is on. What I am most proud of is that we are serving in a Profession of Arms where it is not okay to be racist. It is not okay to assault people. It is not okay to harass people. I'm proud that we are in a force that has stated that openly. Now, because we are an all-volunteer force with close to 700,000 total force Airmen, there will always be Airmen who don't necessarily prescribe to our Core Values or they are still

growing and developing into those Core Values. For those Airmen, we have to hold each other accountable to be able to get there. I'm heartbroken by what is going on

Character is an imperative. You cannot be a good leader without good character. You might be a good manager, or you might be a good boss, but I don't believe you can be somebody who inspires others to excel and succeed if you lack character.

in our Nation, and my focus is on this Air Force family and what we can do as Airmen to make sure that within our fence line, we are upholding the rules and regulations and the values that are so important to our Air Force.

I have to give credit to my predecessor, Chief Wright and my boss and wingman, Gen Brown, for their courage to be able to speak up on something that has been a challenge that they have gone through their whole life. I'm really proud that they had the courage to do so when, at one point in my career, it would have been taboo to ever talk like that. By their actions, they opened up the door to be able to have the conversations that we need to be able to have as leaders, as uncomfortable as some of them may be. Because of their ability to be courageous enough to open that conversation up, it led to culturally across our Air Force, leaders realizing it is okay to have those conversations. But it is also incumbent upon leaders to have a sense of emotional intelligence to tactfully know how to have that conversation and when. That emotional intelligence piece is huge because if we are going to have conversation like that, it has to be genuine. It has to come from a place of acceptance and tolerance where we treat everyone with dignity and respect. When I say you are never too old to learn, you have to come from a place where you actually really do want to understand what your brothers and sisters are going through. Because when you do, that opens up your aperture so much that you can move your organization forward. The silver lining in all of this is that we will come out as a stronger and better force for it.

Garcia: I agree and your point about it previously being taboo to discuss these things is very true. It is so encouraging that we are having these conversations now. That moves into my next question. You talk about character a lot. As the Center for Character and Leadership Development, we focus on developing officers of character. That is the Air Force Academy's Mission. What role do you think character has with good leadership?

Bass: Character is an imperative. You cannot be a good leader without good character. You might be a good manager, or you might be a good boss, but I don't believe you can be somebody who inspires others to excel and succeed if you lack character. I'm reminded of Tony Dungy. I like a lot of his writings and I think he is a phenomenal coach. He always says, when building teams, he would rather have people of character than people of talent. This is not a common perspective for everyone. Even in my own Air Force experience, when it comes to building strong teams, but this isn't how I always thought. When I was younger, I didn't think like that because I didn't have a high sense of EQ. Back then, it was all about winning. Fast forward to now, I would rather have someone who has the character than the skill set because we can always teach skill sets. We can always teach a job. If you have the character, then you have everything that you need to do well in our Air Force.

Garcia: Speaking of Tony Dungy and reading his work, I know you are a reader. How does reading impact your development and what are you reading right now?

Bass: I just pushed out a list on my social media of four books that I am going to read and reread that will take me through the rest of the year. First, I'm reading *The Kill Chain*. I just finished it, but I am about to go through it again and highlight some more things. Anybody who reads that will understand the readiness piece on why what we do matters. In fact, I just spoke to the author today in a Zoom call and I am so excited to, one, have talked to him, and two, be able to geek out

with him a little bit on how we move forward today with our Air Force in making sure that we don't give our adversaries any more advantages. I also love the *Heart Led Leader*. I want to stay true to who I am. I am a leader with heart, so I will read that again. One of other books is *Stillness is the Key*. All of us need some stillness in our lives. That is a good thing. We all need to find a way to quiet our mind and remain focused on the things that we need to. The last one is *No Time for Spectators* by Martin Dempsey. For the smallest Air Force we have ever been, every Airman counts and every leader counts. We don't have time for people to be spectating and just picking apart what we could or should be doing. Everybody is a facilitator or an active role player in what we are doing. The one thing that I will say when it comes to reading, is that I don't always necessarily read a book from beginning to end. It really depends. I don't want people to be intimidated and think that I am a crazy speed reader. That is very far from what is true. I have learned to look at the Table of Contents and find what speaks to me and sometimes just dig into those chapters. I'm also a big audible fan so sometimes I go to sleep listening to something like Malcolm Gladwell. I believe every leader is a learner. So, what I would ask every Airman in their quest for learning to take whatever time you can spare to read. Any time amount will work. If it is five, 10, or 15 minutes a day, that is not much to ask for. If you can just steal away a few minutes a day to read, you will learn something during the time that you may have otherwise been scrolling on your device or some other activity. 15 minutes a day to help you make yourself better will help you be better, your organization be better, and make our Air Force better.

Garcia: That's great advice in being able to start to invest with a little time every day. In my Doctoral program they gave us similar advice in trying to write 15 minutes a day. You don't need an hour or two a day. Just do something. Start somewhere.

Bass: Exactly. You just need to do it.

Garcia: We have talked about a lot of good leadership and character topics. If you could go back, what advice would Chief Bass give Airman Bass?

Bass: That's a great question. If I could do that, I would have saved myself a lot of heartache. One piece of advice would be to give yourself some grace. I was always trying to do everything and be everything. I don't consider myself a perfectionist, but I consider myself pretty squared away. I would debrief in my head how the day went and I would beat myself up on how things really should have gone. So, I would tell myself to give some grace.

A second thing I would tell myself is to learn how to say no early in your career. I don't think I learned that until I was a Senior Master Sergeant. It's not because I was a yes person, but people come to you because they know that you can handle a project, a task, or a team and the tendency is to say yes, because you don't want to tell them no and you are honored that they are even coming to you in the first place. We do that sometimes to the detriment of our own selves and to the detriment of our family. Oh, and by the way, if you are used to not saying no, it is incredibly hard the first time you say no. I'm married to someone who is the total opposite. He can say no in a heartbeat. It takes a lot for him to say yes. He would say, "What is the problem with you? Why is it so hard?" I'll never forget when it first happened. I was a Senior Master Sergeant and they came to me and asked me if I would do the Wing Annual Awards Ceremony. I thought about it and I finally said no. And when I did, a felt like a relief came off of me. Just really think about that because if you are saying yes to something, then you are saying no to something and typically that no is something like you, your family, your PT, or something similar. That would be my second piece of advice.

When I was growing up, the topic of emotional intelligence wasn't a thing. It has recently started becoming more common in the last 10 years. So, the

third piece of advice I would give is to learn about emotional intelligence. That would have helped me in a lot of relationships. When you can actually understand your own emotional intelligence, how it impacts those around you, and vice a versa, it is a powerful thing.

Garcia: Great advice. One last question, which you touched a little bit on already. What are you most excited about in your role as the Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force?

Bass: I am most excited in my role that I have the opportunity to influence the Air Force for good and make positive impact on close to 700,000 Airmen. I wake up every day thinking, how am I going to make a difference? It's pretty amazing know that whatever that difference is, it can potentially impact Airmen and their families. That is pretty cool. It is humbling and van honor and I am just excited to be everyone's Chief during the next four years. Of course, it will come with challenges. While we are going through COVID, we potentially haven't seen all of those challenges yet. But, I know with the team that I have around me, with the support and leadership from Gen Brown, we can continue on the legacy of those that came before us. It is exciting!

Garcia: Thank you for your leadership, your example, and your time.