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Voice



Distinguished Alumnus Award recipient Carl A. Buhler, '89, driven to succeed

driven.

by bernadette gunder

Those who know Carl A. Buhler say he is driven. The United States Air Force Lieutenant Colonel is an up-and-coming officer who has maneuvered the military ranks with hard work and determination. He has consistently been promoted under the zone and has had assignments many of his peers only dream about. Through it all Buhler has maintained his firm work ethic, dedication to high standards and commitment to mentoring others. ▶

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the folks in my squadron are lead the right way.

buhler is the squadron commander for the 57th Aircraft Maintenance Squadron at Nellis Air Force Base in Nevada. He is responsible for the most diverse squadron in Air Combat Command where he leads more than 950 personnel in maintaining and generating top fighter crafts such as the F/A-22 Raptor Fighter.

"I'm honored to be at the Air Force's largest testing and training wing, responsible for basically all of the flight line maintainers to make the missions happen," Buhler says.

Other aircraft maintenance under Buhler's command include the F-16C, F-15C, F-15E and A-10. His squadron generates more than 15,000 sorties each year from his base of operations.

Additionally, his squadron manages all modifications for the 57th Wing and 53rd Wing in support of 10 separate flying programs for the United States Air Force Weapons School, 64th Aggressors Squadron, and the 53rd Test and Evaluations Group.

"My time really varies, for instance, I recently flew down to Tyndall Air Force Base [in Florida] where I had four types of fighters firing live missiles for the weapons school, which is basically our Air Force top gun folks. I went down and we sent 275 maintainers and 30 aircraft," Buhler says.

He continues, "My top two priorities are to make sure we have safe and reliable aircraft and that the aircraft are available. Although I don't actually turn the wrenches, I'm responsible for the overall operation. To me, the biggest

thing I do really is try to increase the communications, if you will, around the world."

Being upfront about expectations plays a big role in Buhler's approach to leadership.

"I really think it's important for my folks to know what I expect out of them—point blank. I let them know how I grade them and what I look for [in terms of their performance]. And I give them some advice on what I've learned over my career, things that I have seen," Buhler explains.

Buhler, who has been keeping a list of things he wanted to do in his career since college, sets the bar high for himself and those under his command.

"I've been told that I have extremely high standards and that's something I'm not going to give in on. I've been part of

The alarms went off and smoke started coming down the halls and a lot of people started freaking out.

units that have extremely high standards and because of those things and my own personality I have high standards," Buhler says.

He gains perspective from one of his mentors.

"One thing General Moseley [General T. Michael Moseley, vice chief of staff, headquarters U.S. Air Force, Washington D.C.] told me before I took over this job is, 'Carl, don't worry about fixing the whole Air Force. Just worry about fixing your squadron.' That was really important because we have some 370,000 plus people in the Air Force and I have almost 1,000 in this squadron. All I can worry about is making sure the folks in my squadron are lead the right way and they have a commander that sets an example each and every day," Buhler says with a tone of determination.

Peak Performance

Buhler's service record is diverse and reflects his rapid rise in the ranks. One of his key assignments was serving as the chief legislative liaison for the U.S. Air Force Executive Issues Team in the Office of the Secretary of the U.S. Air Force in Washington, D.C. During his tenure in Washington, he identified, monitored and developed the Air Force position on a number of legislative matters and other issues impacting worldwide operations.

"The opportunity that I had to work as a congressional liaison officer and work directly for the secretary of the Air Force was a highlight. Being a major in the Air Force and seeing the chief of staff of the Air Force and all the four stars everyday was exciting. It was real good," Buhler recalls.

Even though he had opportunities to attend important meetings, brief the general and meet dignitaries, the

collective that is and was the United States Air Force had a special place in his heart.

"One of the jobs I was responsible for when I was at the Pentagon was the Air Force Memorial. I really took that job to heart because there have been millions of people who have served ahead of me and there I was every week, every day, working the Air Force Memorial," Buhler says with pride.

Unfortunately, his memories of Washington are not all pleasant. Buhler was inside the Pentagon during the September 11 attack, making what has come to be regarded as a national tragedy a deeply personal matter for him.

"I can't remember the exact time that it happened but I had walked out into the hallway and saw a lot of the officers had CNN playing in the background. Later, I got a pop up on my e-mail saying a plane had just crashed into the World Trade Center," Buhler remembers.

He and several peers proceeded to tune into CNN, where they saw the second plane crash into the World Trade Center. Still unaware of the magnitude of the situation, they debated the type of airplane, speculated about the incident, and their routines continued.

"I had a few extra minutes before I was due to brief the general about the Air Force Memorial and I was going out of town that week to a NASCAR race up in New Hampshire. So I was going to stop by the ATM to pick up some money before my meeting. The ATM that I was walking to was destroyed by the airplane," Buhler recalls.

Uncertainty followed.

"You couldn't get out. The alarms went off and smoke started coming down the halls and a lot of people started freaking out. It's a day I will

always remember," Buhler says after a pause.

Getting out of harm's way in the midst of chaos was a challenge to say the least.

"It was an overcast day. The parking lot was a mess when they started wheeling out people and commandeering vehicles. People were saying another airplane was coming in and people were running under the bridge. They started saying the White House was under attack and we were looking over in the direction of the White House. We heard the Secretary of State was under attack and different stuff like that," Buhler remembers.

It would be some time before Pentagon occupants knew exactly what had happened and even more time before their loved ones learned of their fate.



▲ Buhler and his staff make sure United States Air Force aircraft are safe and reliable.

I've had people that saw something in me that I may have not seen in myself and pushed me to new heights.

"My wife didn't know for five hours if I was alive or not," Buhler says.

Regrouping from the attack and coping with the aftermath was more than military protocol, more than instilling order. Buhler says people deal with their memories in different ways. He has seen friends, whom he describes as very stern hard driven military officers, break down when they recall that day.

"It still gives me chills to talk about it. It's a very emotional topic. I saw bodies

getting pulled out in front of me, guys that I saw and rode the train with everyday. In fact, there was a guy who got a haircut right before mine the day before and he had told my barber that his wife was pregnant, and he was killed the next day," Buhler says.

With an unsteady voice he adds, "When you ride on the train to work and stuff and you see these people and you strike up casual conversations and then a month afterwards, you realize you'll

never see that guy any more. Then you walk down the hall and you see that guy's photo. It really gets to you on an emotional side."

Flying High

Becoming a member of the U.S. Air Force Air Demonstration Squadron, The Thunderbirds, was a dream come true for Buhler.

"I saw the Thunderbirds do an air show out at Moody [Air Force Base in Valdosta] and that's when I told my dad I wanted to be a Thunderbird. My one big goal was to be a Thunderbird one day," Buhler says.

In 1996, he was handpicked for the squad. Buhler was the maintenance officer for Thunderbird No. 11 and served during the 1997-1998 air demonstration seasons. During his tenure as a Thunderbird, Buhler served during the 50th anniversary of the United States Air Force and received the Meritorious Service Medal.

"One of my biggest highlights was getting to fly in one of the Thunderbirds over Valdosta in the Moody Air Force Base air show. It was kind of a return to home," Buhler says.

Perhaps the height of his time was while serving as the Thunderbirds liaison to the Washington D.C. air show when he helped coordinate a meeting between the Thunderbirds and United States President George W. Bush.

"I got to go meet President Bush in the Oval Office with the Thunderbirds for about 25 minutes. He shook every single one of our hands and thanked us for what we do for the country. It was one of the biggest moments of my life," Buhler recalls.

Buhler says he owes meeting his wife to his association with the Thunderbirds. His wife's father was the Thunderbirds Commander/Leader in 1979 when Buhler saw the air demonstration squadron at Moody with his father. Years



▲ Buhler values interaction with his staff and takes on mentoring as a personal and professional goal. He hopes to inspire others, just as his personal mentors have encouraged him.



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later when he met his wife, Buhler found out it was her father who did that air show.

"From a personal and professional side, being in the Thunderbirds was definitely the big highlight of my life," Buhler says.

Driving Force

Buhler's drive and determination are evident in his actions.

"I was always kind of a big dreamer. I always like to succeed in what I do. I'm a fairly driven person. I guess the two acronyms driven and intense are how people usually describe me. My goal truly is just to be the best that I'm capable of being. I realize you have to control your own destiny. I don't know where I'll go in the Air Force but I do know in the Air Force, like in the civilian world, you control your own destiny. It's a result of performance," Buhler explains.

Buhler says the professional and personal successes in his life are in part due to the influence of others. He has had mentors who pushed him to tackle areas he did not consider on his own.

"I've had people that saw something in me that I may have not seen in myself and pushed me to new heights. Because of them pushing me further in jobs and recommending me I've been able to have some fantastic jobs," Buhler explains.

Buhler hopes to inspire others, just as his personal mentors have encouraged him.

He meets with his officers and encourages them to set goals for themselves. His influence does not stop with those under his command. He speaks to audiences at colleges, high schools and the like, educating them about the Air Force and sharing his personal experiences.

"I have spoken to all types. A lot of times I'll have a teacher who really

wants ROTC students to talk to someone. One of the things I always tell folks is that I was told many times in my career or before hand, 'Oh you can't be an officer,' or different things like that. And I just tell them, you can overcome those things just with sheer will power, hard work and determination," Buhler says.

He spoke to Valdosta State University Air Force ROTC students in October during the week of homecoming festivities. He hopes sharing his experiences will help make the possibilities real for young cadets.

"I've had such a unique career on Capitol Hill, being stationed all over the world, being in over 40 countries and being on the Thunderbirds. Those are the types of things I like to talk to the cadets about," Buhler says.

He adds, "There is one thing I like to tell folks, especially Valdosta State ROTC cadets, it's all about performance. I was sitting in a cadet chair just 15-16 years ago and look at what I've been able to do. They can do those same things."

Deep Roots

Buhler is deeply rooted in his family and collegiate experience. He cites his father as one of his greatest influences.

"My father was in the Air Force but he never talked to me about joining. He did require me to take junior ROTC at Lowndes High School. A combination of those courses and just having my father be in the military inspired me to want to become an officer," Buhler says.

The Valdosta State AFROTC program was a natural progression.

"I had an ROTC scholarship and I could have used it basically at any university that would have accepted me. I chose Valdosta State because it had such a good reputation and it was close to home," Buhler says.

It was his experiences at Valdosta State that helped build his trademark character and determination. He has particularly fond memories of field training during his sophomore and junior years.

"A couple of years before I went there, Valdosta was ranked in the top four or five ROTC units in the country. It was a tradition we wanted to carry on. My class did extremely well while we were at field training too. That was one thing I always remembered, the intensity that Valdosta State folks put towards the field training and preparing the cadets," Buhler recalls.

Buhler's good memories extend to the time he spent in the math department.

"I had some instructors there that really, really cared about you as an individual, not just a number. That's what I really liked best about Valdosta State," Buhler says.

He continues, "You know, we all have things to learn. We're not just all of a sudden superstars at our own rate. It takes a lot of people to help us along the way. I remember a lot of my professors would take time after class and sit down with you for an hour or two hours. It's interesting because this is my ninth assignment and 16th job in the Air Force, I talked to a lot of fellow officers and they never had that type of environment in their schools."

Being selected as the 2003 Valdosta State University Alumni Association's Distinguished Alumnus is a homecoming for Buhler.

"I am extremely honored and humbled. Everything I do, I do because that's just how I am. I don't do anything to win awards. I'm humbled but I also started to appreciate how much Valdosta State did for me; it gave me my core foundation," Buhler says.

Buhler is married to the former Sharon Smith and the couple resides in Las Vegas, Nevada. ■