

PERSPECTIVES



“FIND YOUR HUMBLER COMFORT ZONE”
BY
MASTER SERGEANT JAKEITH L. ROBINSON,
USAF

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I remember it like it was yesterday. As I do every day, I walked into work and greeted all the commander’s support section personnel. We have a great working relationship, and they are like a family, so my days always start and end with them.

On this particular March morning in the spring of 2022, I put my things in my office, opened my door, and began my daily routine with the team. My chief always tells jokes, so the whole team was laughing about something he said when the commander walked by and casually remarked, “Congratulations, Fifteenth Air Force,” to me.

We carried on with our normal business conversation, and after about 20 minutes, we asked him what he meant by Fifteenth Air Force. The commander said, “You were nominated for the Air Combat Command (ACC) First Sergeant of the Year by (Fifteenth Air Force). You won at the numbered Air Force level. You are the Fifteenth Air Force’s First Sergeant of the Year! The wing commander just sent the email out.” I was immediately humbled and overcome with joy as he showed me the email.

Every year, the Air Force recognizes 12 Outstanding Airmen of the Year, a program that dates to 1956. It was created to recognize and highlight the Air Force’s supreme performers of the year from the enlisted core. Nominees for the 12 Outstanding Airmen consist of 35 enlisted members from across the Air Force, with different career fields throughout each major command, field operating agency, direct reporting unit, and Headquarters Air Force. The winners are selected based on their superior leadership, job performance, and personal achievements. First Sergeant of the Year is not officially

recognized as part of the Air Force 12 Outstanding Airmen, but, in my opinion, the achievement is held on the same level. It would truly be an honor to be nominated among such an elite group of Airmen.

Fast forward to April 2022, when I received an email about an appointment on a Tuesday morning to meet with wing leadership in the command post. The appointment was out of the ordinary, since the wing leadership was in a command summit that whole week, so I called the command chief's executive assistant to confirm it wasn't an error. She informed me Air Combat Command would announce its winners during a video conference, and I was invited since I was a nominee. I remember feeling very nervous because I had no clue what to expect. Since I had just switched units, I informed my new commander and my previous leadership because they were pivotal to my nomination.

When Tuesday arrived, I remembered thanking God this was happening first thing in the morning since my nerves couldn't wait until the end of the day. My senior enlisted leader and I arrived at the command post, where we met my previous commander in the parking lot. He and I have a great relationship, so seeing him before going in helped to calm my nervousness. When I entered the building, I remember thinking that winning at Fifteenth Air Force was a great accomplishment, and that no matter what happens, I was proud of what I accomplished. On one hand, I knew that ACC was the largest major command in the Air Force, and there are a lot of great first sergeants doing awesome work, so not winning would be understandable. On the other hand, I knew that I worked extremely hard this year, I had a solid package put together by an amazing writer, and I had a fighting chance to win.

As I was sitting in the command post, everyone in senior leadership started filing in, and the wing commander told me to sit next to him. The computer fired up for the virtual event, and the various wings and numbered air forces started their sound and video checks. I took this opportunity to ask the wing commander what I was supposed to do. In my opinion, my wing commander is one of the most chill and laid-back commanders I have ever met. He likely had no idea just how nervous I was because he leaned over and nonchalantly said, "Oh, they're just going to tell you, you won. We're going to clap and say congratulations, and then, you're going to wave and say thank you. Then we will all head back to the leadership summit."

I was completely caught off guard, and my feelings of anxiety instantly changed to that of being overwhelmed with emotions. It took everything in me not to break down. Being nominated was great, knowing I won was exceptional, and not showing emotion before the meeting started was incredibly difficult.

When the ACC staff meeting finally began, the general started congratulating each winner one by one. He got to my category: "ACC First Sergeant of the Year is Master

Sergeant Jakeith Robinson from the Maintenance Operations Flight, 552nd Air Control Wing at Tinker Air Force Base.” I waved and said thank you while everyone in the room cheered. The ACC commander ended with, “I will see you all next week at the ACC’s 12 Outstanding Airmen of the Year Awards Banquet.”. The awards banquet is hosted by Air Combat Command to recognize its 12 Outstanding Airmen, First Sergeant of the Year, and civilian category award winners.

In thinking about why I won this award, I remembered when I worked with my father at his cleaning service as a kid. He paid me for jobs I would’ve done for free. Working with him made me realize that I genuinely enjoyed helping people, no matter what that involved. Everything in my First Sergeant of the Year award package are things I would have done without any recognition or award. The simple fact is that I love being in the United States Air Force and I love every minute of being a first sergeant. In my opinion, the best job in the Air Force is a first sergeant, although it is often called a “thankless job.”

Before I joined the military, I worked with my father, beginning in high school and up to entering the Air Force in 2004. We cleaned houses, office buildings, and commercial properties. The cleaning company was a business, but to some, we were family. My dad would tell me to occupy the family so he could clean. So, I would spend a lot of time interacting with the family so my father could work. If I wasn’t occupying families, I was helping him clean.

Often, I was responsible for the special request jobs while my father did the general cleaning. Customers would ask me to reorganize rooms, move furniture, or clear out storage spaces. I never minded doing these jobs because they usually involved me helping someone personally with something they couldn’t normally do. My father and I bonded during these times, and I learned to cherish every moment of our time working together.

When I hear the phrase “thankless job,” I think about all the times my father and I would go into houses, office buildings, and businesses when no one was there. I remember cleaning in a manner that left an impression. At least, I hope it did.

My father had keys to the office buildings and businesses we cleaned, so I never saw many of those clients. I cleaned those facilities like I was surprising the faculty with a brand-new work center. I remember cleaning and organizing homes as if they were mine. I imagined the clients coming home or going to work and being amazed by the job we had done. The job was thankless, but I found purpose and fulfillment. Personally, I don’t think first sergeant is a thankless job. Like when I cleaned, I may not always hear a thank you, but I truly believe we make a difference, and our personnel are thankful for what we do.

The following week I attended Air Combat Command's 12 Outstanding Airmen of the Year awards banquet at Langley Air Force Base, Virginia. Command leadership held the event to honor and recognize the award winners. I thought it would be a normal awards banquet, but Air Combat Command pulled out the red carpet and planned an entire day of events just for the winners. According to the itinerary, we would leave lodging at 7:30 a.m. and finish up around 10 p.m. They even asked our shirt sizes for personalized polos. I truly felt honored and was excited about the trip.

When I arrived at the Norfolk International Airport, I had never attended an event of this caliber let alone been recognized at such a high-level banquet, so I had no clue what to expect. I had not arranged a ride to bring me to the base until my mom asked how I was getting there. It is safe to say I was living in the moment the entire trip.

I arrived at lodging and was greeted with a welcome package that contained my personalized polo, a signed letter from the commander, our itinerary, and other swag. From the second I stepped on the installation, I felt like an honorary guest. I made my way to my room, got settled, and called my wing commander to let him know I had arrived. Based on the itinerary, we had nothing scheduled until the following day, but I knew the commanders and chiefs had socials to attend for the evening.

After settling in, my commander and his wife invited me to the commissary with them. While at the commissary, I said to my commander, "Sir, I heard you and the chief have events you have to attend tonight. The commanders have their thing, and the chiefs have their thing." He responded with, "Oh, you're going too! There's a social tonight, and you can either go with me or the chief. We are going right after the commissary." I did not plan to attend a social, so I did not pack any clothes, nor was I dressed for a social. I was still in the same athletic wear from the plane. But as I said, I was living in the moment, so athletic wear it was. I was looking forward to seeing the other award winners and did not want to miss the event because I was underdressed.

We arrived at the Langley AFB club for the social. It had just been remodeled and looked great. To be honest, the whole installation was immaculate and fitting for a headquarters base. I remember thinking, "this is some of that MAJCOM money." As we entered the room, I immediately noticed I was underdressed, and no one was wearing name tags. The attendees were all general officers, wing and numbered air force commanders, command chiefs, and their spouses, and they were all wearing business casual attire. After a few introductions and conversations, I realized I was the only award winner. I will not lie, I felt a little uncomfortable, so I made my way to the side of the room and stood next to my commander's wife.

She is such a great person, and like me, found it difficult to identify who was who at the social. We even laughed when we tried to guess the names of the people who came to

talk to us. As I watched her speak to multiple people, I overheard, “Chief, do you need help bringing food in from your vehicle?” Before the conversation ended, I had already volunteered to help. As I was helping, I found out that the chief was the new Air Combat Command first sergeant and on the board for the First Sergeant of the Year packages. As we introduced ourselves to each other, he expressed how he looked forward to learning more about me and hearing about some of the items highlighted in my package. I thought to myself, the military is such a small community, and it was a privilege to meet him.

The chief only had a portion of the food, so I helped him get everything out of his car and brought it into the facility. While I assisted him, I overheard him talking about the details of the social and how more help was needed to get everything ready. I volunteered to help and left the social with two nice ladies, who I later learned were the base installation commander’s wife and the command chief. The rest of the food was at the installation’s commander’s house, so we headed that way, and I received a brief tour of command housing. Again, Langley AFB is one of the most beautiful installations I have ever visited. The thing I love most about being in the military is the family dynamic between one another. I can meet someone for the first time and be treated like family because we both serve in this great organization—the Air Force.

The whole experience of being welcomed into the home of the Langley AFB wing commander, meeting the family’s dog, and helping to prepare the food for the social reminded me of those times I spent working with my father. No matter the circumstance or situation, I find comfort in finding a way to help others, and I usually form a connection with them. During the time at the house, we shared stories about our families and experiences in the military, told jokes, and laughed. I recall thinking, “chief is hilarious and so down-to-earth,” as she shared bits of her chiefly wisdom with me.

We packed all the food and made our way back to the base club to set up the food, and everything came together great. The food was good, and the social was a blast. I had a great time and met some awesome people, especially the Fifteenth Air Force command chiefs. I was extremely grateful to my leadership for sharing this opportunity with me. I had promised myself before I boarded the plane to come to Langley AFB that I was going to soak in every moment of this trip.

I think I accomplished this by taking the time to introduce people to Jakeith, a man who grew up working with his father, learning to value the impact of helping others. Being named the ACC First Sergeant of the Year is an amazing honor, but, in my opinion, the greatest accomplishment for a first sergeant is earning the respect and trust of others—where they refer to you as “My Shirt.” I earned that honor from a few throughout the night.

The next day was incredible. Air Combat Command pulled out all the stops and put together events I will never forget. When I got on the bus outside of lodging in the morning, I said to myself, “soak every moment of this day in; you’ve earned it.” All the award winners and their families were truly a pleasure to be around; the command could not have chosen a better group of professionals to recognize.

Once we went through the morning rehearsal of the banquet and a few introductions, we connected, shared stories, and started having fun. By the time we left the first stop, you would have thought we all came from the same base and had known each other for years. We made the most of the experience and the time spent with one another. The staff members who arranged the day accompanied us for the whole day and set the tone with so much professionalism and positive energy. The awards banquet was the icing on the cake, and I felt extremely honored to be a part of such an amazing event.

Throughout my career, I constantly reflect on my foundational upbringing and look to my comfort zone. No matter the circumstances, I am always comfortable serving, whether serving others or my country. Gordon B. Hinckley once said, “Being humble means recognizing that we are not on earth to see how important we can become, but to see how much difference we can make in the lives of others.”

I choose to live in my humbled comfort zone.

Master Sergeant Jakeith L. Robinson, USAF, is the First Sergeant of the 552d Operations Support Squadron, Tinker AFB, Oklahoma