



# MAKING A BETTER SPACE OPERATOR

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HOW A WARFIGHTER MINDSET WILL  
IMPROVE AIR FORCE SPACE COMMAND

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The Air Force has been developing and testing space technology since the 1950's with the intent of harnessing space to protect and defend the interests of the US and its allies. Over the decades, there have been advances in using space for enhanced communication, sharing intelligence, global positioning, and a myriad of other missions. Our challenge as the strongest military in the world is to adapt our space operators to a warfighter mindset so that they are prepared to defend our assets from an adversary threat on land, air, and in space. An advancing enemy, lack of funding, and low member morale are some obstacles that the space community needs to overcome. Our short and long term solutions are to enable effective intelligence gathering, garner Congressional endorsement, and maintain good leadership and a strong workforce as the next chapter of our overall mission unfolds.

As technology has flourished, so has the Air Force's determination to control space. When I joined the Air Force in 2010, the battlespace environment had already become contested through its overuse. Other countries had built up



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their space footprint as well, and had begun developing techniques in an attempt to degrade the space environment. China and Russia are building and launching satellites regularly, as well as developing anti-satellite weapons and jamming equipment, and other countries are following suit to threaten the battlespace. Knowing that our Air Force must evolve to decrease our vulnerabilities, our top leadership has charged us with staying ahead of our enemies. Our country's security requires that space operators adopt a warfighter mindset and develop a more active role in the fight – but how can this be accomplished?

When I think of a warfighter, I think of someone who is well trained, well-motivated, and always ready for the fight. A warfighter is not complacent; they uphold the Air Force core values, especially in striving for excellence in all they do. This warfighter mindset keeps them alive in battle, and requires that they help keep their fellow Wingmen alive. Most space operators have not been thinking that way because they are deployed in place; they are not on the front lines, and they do not see the effects they create or prevent. Space situational



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awareness only became a space mission area in the Air Force Doctrine Joint Publication 3-14 in 2013, and our operators have struggled to replace their passive mindset with a more active posture. Furthermore, a lot of our equipment is located in space – we won't ever see it unless it deorbits and comes flaming back into the atmosphere – and so we are understandably detached from it. Being more present, knowing what one is attacking or defending, and caring about the outcome are all qualities that a space operator of the future needs. Initiatives like the Space Mission Force (SMF) help to set the stage for this shift in mindset, but there are still challenges to overcome.

Staying ahead of the enemy is paramount, and their determination to defeat the US is all the more reason for space operators to start thinking like a warfighter. Other countries are developing aggressive tactics, testing new equipment, and staying close to our operations tempo in an attempt to capture the ultimate high ground... space. We need additional intelligence gathering systems to know what the enemy is doing. As a solution, our top leadership is



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already developing the Joint Interagency Combined Space Operations Center (JICSpOC) to work with US Strategic Command (USSTRATCOM) and Air Force Space Command (AFSPC) to provide a central point for intelligence gathering to the Department of Defense and the greater Intelligence Community. With this joint effort to share information between land, air, sea, space and cyberspace missions, the Air Force is ensuring that our space operators will have the timely and accurate intelligence to perform their missions flawlessly. The JICSpOC is expected to publish its first standard operating procedures by January 2017.

A lack of funding for the space community poses another problem for building a more active warrior ethos. In order to build new units like the JICSpOC or continue to recruit and train top Airman, money will always be an issue, as our top leaders are painfully aware. When it comes to staying ahead of the adversary our biggest ally, Congress, also has the deepest pockets. Congressional endorsement of AFSPC missions will ensure that space operators receive the most advanced equipment to complete new and ongoing missions.



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The fiscal challenge is simple: with the money the Air Force is given, where can it be allocated in order to stay ahead of the adversary? If space dominance is the key to fighting future wars, then it is important that our top leadership continue to advocate for AFSPC and the development of its personnel and processes. The enlisted force can also have their voices heard through the Air Force Sergeant's Association and other groups that speak for military members on Capitol Hill. With continued government fiscal support, we are enabled to continue defending the country. Without that endorsement, our capabilities will degrade and our morale will suffer.

The biggest challenge to developing a better space operator is most certainly a question of morale. Squadron morale can ebb and flow over time, but our newfound warfighter mindset does not allow for our morale to stay low for long. The Space Mission Force is an innovative plan given by top leadership to spark the warfighter mindset in space operators, but without buy-in from the lowest ranks, SMF could derail morale and fail in its purpose. To combat



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morale slippage, we need good leadership and an enthusiastic workforce - they do wonders for morale, especially when working long hours on shift or being inundated with power point slides during Advanced Training. One way to elevate morale that doesn't involve spending booster club funds or baking cookies is to remind space operators what they are fighting for. It can be as simple as sharing stories from deployed members, or as formal as in-depth intelligence briefings outlining effects of the crew's operations. When we are reminded of who and what we are fighting for, it is much easier to stay present while performing the mission.

General Hyten, Commander, AFSPC, remarked at the 2016 Space Symposium that our soldiers cannot be left alone on the battlefield. As a space operator, that image of protecting fellow Airmen, Soldiers, or Sailors, no matter how far away, should be a driving force in completing the mission. There was a moment when I was working on the 11 Space Warning Squadron operations floor that perfectly illustrates General Hyten's point. Our mission was to supply



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missile warning and battlespace awareness for the warfighter, but after a year of staring at a computer screen on crew, I had lost perspective on what I was fighting for. One evening before our crew shift started, our crew commander tearfully shared with us that his friend had just been killed while serving in Afghanistan. He lamented that his Wingman was gone, but he reminded us that there were others to save. The information that we collected and sent to the Combatant Commanders would allow them to tell their Airmen to grab a helmet or duck and cover if need be. He wanted to acknowledge his friend's sacrifice to our country, and told us somberly that it is jobs like ours that will help keep our fellow military members alive while they serve on the front lines. I haven't forgotten what I learned that day, and it is a necessary lesson for all space operators to know as they begin building a warfighter mindset within themselves.

