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24th Air Force commander retires after 36 years of service

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24th Air Force Public Affairs

4/28/2011 - **LACKLAND AIR FORCE BASE, Texas** - Four decades have passed since Richard Webber left to go play football at the only division one NCAA school that would bring on a 5'8" tailback - the U.S. Air Force Academy.

"There were two things going on simultaneously, but one was clearly the driving factor," said Maj. Gen. "Dick" Webber, 24th Air Force commander, who retires April 29 after 36 years of service in the U.S. Air Force. "I wanted the opportunity to play division one football. When you're five eight and a half and you take your tapes around for the colleges to look at, they say, 'If you were only six-foot-two, we could get you in.'"

General Webber's family of eight lived comfortably enough, but was facing the hard financial reality of having three of their children in college at the same time. The young Mr. Webber applied at all the service academies.

The Coast Guard came through first, then West Point, but he waited longer. The Air Force Academy acceptance came at the last possible moment. He went to Colorado Springs and played football for two and a half seasons as a starting tailback.

"So I did get to play football and I can say that I've been hit by 350-pound guys," said General Webber with a chuckle. "That's showing up on my VA physicals now."

Cadet Webber worked hard for his next goal in life. He lived to fly as a navigator. Unfortunately, his eye sight was not what it needed to be.

"They didn't have the eye surgery back then," he said. "I knew I could be a navigator, so I took every nav class that I could take."

He underwent eye procedures to improve vision. While his vision did improve, it was not enough to get into pilot training. That gave Cadet Webber five career choices: missile operations, missile maintenance, aircraft maintenance, engineering and weapons systems controller.

"I chose missile operations; why?" asked General Webber. "Because it was operations." This mindset followed him throughout his career.

The missile operations career field was tied with a master's degree program. Cadet Webber chose Whiteman Air Force Base, Mo., because it had the largest "big name" school near it: the University of Missouri. So, 2nd Lt. Webber learned to be a missile combat crew member while studying for his master's degree in business administration. He was also given the opportunity to brief the Chief of Staff of the Air Force on the operation of the Minuteman weapon system.

Captain Webber went to the nation's capital in October 1980 where he took part in the Air Staff Training



Maj. Gen. Richard Webber, 24th Air Force commander, speaks at the San Antonio Cyber Security Caucus Summit April 9. In one of his last public speaking engagements on active duty, he spoke to the audience about the maturing mission of 24th Air Force, and the intent to partner with academia and industry to meet U.S. Government needs in cyberspace. San Antonio is becoming a hub of cyber industry, academic research, and technology development. (Courtesy photo provided by The Greater San Antonio Chamber of Commerce)

Program, working with the Analysis Directorate. His supervisor at the time recognized the captain as a workhorse, stating he was solely responsible for developing operational concepts and directing concepts evaluation as the study director for mobile Intercontinental Ballistic Missile basing.

From D.C., Captain Webber moved on to Offutt Air Force Base, Neb., where he was the chief of the Future ICBM Systems Branch at Strategic Air Command. He headed to the Naval War College in Newport, R.I., as a major, where he became a distinguished graduate.

During his second Pentagon tour, he was responsible for developing Air Force and joint positions on strategic offensive force structure. The major's supervisor had said if the issue is the toughest and the consequences of failure are most severe, "Call Dick."

Pinning on lieutenant colonel in 1988, he served on the air staff as the deputy chief of staff of Plans and Operations. The National Security Council selected his plans for verifying bomber and ballistic missile warheads and mobile missile operations under arms control.

He then served a squadron command tour at Whiteman, attended the Industrial College of the Armed Forces in Washington, D.C., and served as the chief of the Systems Interoperability Branch at NATO Headquarters in Brussels, Belgium. This is where he met his future wife, Michèle Golley. She retired and followed him to Great Falls to live downtown while he commanded both the support group and the operations group at the 341st Missile Wing, Malmstrom Air Force Base, Mont. They got married on a harrowing weekend in 1997 when the colonel was stationed at his next assignment at Grand Forks Air Force Base, N.D. There he oversaw the first group in the history of the Minuteman missile program to safely move six missiles per month while deactivating the 321st Missile Group.

"I was supposed to be the deactivation guy," General Webber recalled of the spring of 1997. "While we were up there, we had the Red River Flood." The Red River Flood was the worst flood in Manitoba, Canada, history since 1826. The 321st Missile Group was fully involved in sand bagging operations to help off base. Colonel Webber's unit wanted to find more ways to help the community, but had to find a way to legally provide support with military resources. He called Gen. Howell M. Estes III, the Air Force Space Command commander, his four-star boss.

"I told him, I am compelled to do this to help our town," he said. Space Command provided the orders, so his group helped as many as they could.

Much to the dismay of the colonel, this drive to help his community did not stop at work. On the weekend that the colonel and his fiancée had flown to Boston to get married, his sons disobeyed his orders to stay off the flood dikes, and while in Boston, Colonel Webber watched CNN with horror as he saw his middle son slinging sandbags on the dike, at risk of being washed away in near-freezing snow melt.

"They're just great kids," said General Webber in admiration. "They wanted to help their community."

In the summer of 1997, the colonel got a call from General Estes. The Air Force was forming the Aerospace Command and Control Agency at Langley Air Force Base, Va. The general had words of encouragement for him.

"I want you to go because you're a warrior and I can train you on space," General Webber recalled.

The colonel's next job would be at Schriever Air Force Base, Colo., as the 50th Space Wing commander. From there, he was selected for promotion and went to AFSPC as the inspector general. After six months, he was inspecting the 21st Space Wing.

"We were five minutes away from doing a mass casualty exercise," he explained. "Do you know what our exercise event was going to be? An airplane crash."

The date was Sept. 11, 2001.

"We were five minutes out from starting the exercise. We were in my office when the plane hit the second tower," said General Webber. "We all knew then. This was no accident. Then shortly after that, we found out about the Pentagon. We were at war."

Colonel Webber would soon take a call from Lt. Gen. Roger DeKok, the AFSPC vice commander at the time who has since passed away, but had served as a great mentor for him. The general told him he would be deploying. The colonel was deployed in less than 10 days.

"About 80 percent of my job was information operations," he said about his job as the assistant air operations center director for space and information warfare. "Network operations/defense - the things that we do here at the 24th Air Force. I was gaining skills that were preparing me for this future job."

General Webber pinned on his first star on New Year's Day of 2002.

"We did it on the AOC floor with our joint coalition allies and all of our joint partners in the middle of combat operations," he said. "There is no better place to get a promotion, except for one problem - my family wasn't there. They did send pictures and personal notes to my family."

The general could not travel in theater as others did. He stayed behind as CAOC leadership.

"For about two weeks worth of time, spread out over a couple of months, I was running the CAOC during combat operations of Operation Enduring Freedom," he said. "I think I may be one of the first non-flyers to ever be in charge of an AOC."

Not long after his return state side, General Webber was tapped to be the A6 director for AFSPC Headquarters.

The concept of mission assurance became a way of life for the general after a computer attack on Peterson Air Force Base, Colo., in 2003. As was standard Air Force practice at the time, the network was shut down to protect it from the attack. But General Webber got a very angry phone call and was told to report to Gen. Ralph "Ed" Eberhart, commander of U.S. Northern Command.

"That's when I found out I had shut down his 26 feeds that were building his situational awareness, they were his common operating picture, and his command and control," said General Webber. "That's when I made a personal vow to find a way to operate and fight through the attack, keep the mission going."

The general would deploy again a year later. This time he would report to Gen. Tommy Franks' staff for Operation Iraqi Freedom. His job was deputy of operations for space and information operations. When he returned state side and back to work, he became the wing commander for the largest wing in Space Command - 21st Space Wing. There, he trained up and became mission ready on the Counter Communications System.

"I've been combat ready six times, including all three wing commands," he said proudly.

General Webber then served as the director of Installation and Mission Support at AFSPC Headquarters. He then went back to the Pentagon to be the Headquarters Air Force deputy A3/5. This is where he was chosen to lead the new 24th Air Force.

"So if you believe in it, here's a good example of divine intervention," he said. "I had a series of going into the 'never been done before.' There were many times when we were working without a net. I'm just amazingly proud of what this organization has done."

When General Webber arrived, there were fewer than 30 people and now almost 400 make up the numbered air force staff and its operations center.

"This is a world-class organization," said General Webber. "I give credit to all the innovative Airmen who came here and said, 'How do we do this? How do we operationalize and normalize this new domain? How do we integrate this with air and space ... and it's just been one hell of a ride.'"

And he played division one football ... for a while.

"You make these hugely important decisions for eventually inconsequential reasons," said General Webber. "During and after 36 years of active duty, but really 40 years if you include the academy, I'm still here every morning and I'm on fire. "I have a passion for what we do and what our Airmen stand for and how we do this mission. That's going to be the difficulty on the outside is finding something that I'll have an equal passion for. I will miss it, but it's been one hell of a ride."