

Georgia's Business #408

Guest: Major General Tom Owen Commander, Warner Robins Air Logistics Center

Richard Warner

I'm Richard Warner. Welcome this week on Georgia's Business from Central Georgia the commander of the Warner Robbins Air Logistics Center Major General Tomas J Owen. A career air force man he's held nearly 2 dozen assignments since he graduated from the Air force Academy out in Colorado Springs and is completing now I guess your assignment in Central Georgia.

Tom Owen

Yes within the week Richard I will complete a two year tour as commander there at Warner Robbins Air Logistics Center.

Richard Warner

And you are headed into the snowy north?

Tom Owen

Snowy date in Ohio and we've there before some winters are quite snowy and others are just absolutely delightful but none of them are as warm as we've experienced here in Georgia.

Richard Warner

You have high praise for Macon and for that area a third tour here.

Tom Owen

Absolutely Richard we've been blessed as an air force officer I go where they ask me to go and this is our third time here from 96 to 98 and again from 99 to 2001 and now from 2006 to 2008.

Richard Warner

Is this a promotion for you?

Tom Owen

Technically I am a major General now and I will be major General in the new assignment but in the new assignment at headquarters for Air force material command am still under the same four star General so my boss will not change but rather than being one of his field commander I will be one of the staff officers there working for him on his headquarter staff. The title is Director of logistics and sustainment.

Richard Warner

My point of view comes from commercial business and if I get uprooted and transferred to another operation the first thing I got to do is get my bearings. I have to figure out what needs to be fixed in my eyes that's why am here. Is it the same way with you or is it all structured and you know exactly what you're supposed to do?

Tom Owen

It will be very similar although I must say that being a military organization and having just now completed a two year command tour in the field. Am very familiar with the major issues in the command and the major issues as a major command headquarters that we work with the Pentagon the air staff and office Secretary of Defense as well as how we as a command will interface with our customers and our customers off course are the men and women that fly the airplanes and operate the equipment that we buy and maintain in Air force material command.

Richard Warner

Because your job as logistics, logistics would mean that this valuable hardware this planes this expensive assets break and your job your teams job is to make sure that they work.

Tom Owen

Absolutely! And that includes everything from the full supply chain activities to forecasting future breaks and determining whether we need to do a modification to that component or just perhaps buy more of the same kind of component and then of course working the partnerships that we have with industry. With our major defense corporations as well as the second and third tier companies in the defense industry that produce the hardware that we operate.

Richard Warner

Well they are very interested I think in what it is that's going on in your place because the people who buy make the decision on who gonna get the contract are gonna wanna know how reliable those planes are and how much work you're gonna eventually have to do.

Tom Owen

Absolutely and that's one of the key things is working as from early on in the acquisition process as possible the long term sustainment plan for weapons system and that's working with the people at the aeronautical system center which is at Wright Peterson Airfare Base and electronic system center and our center that people that are procuring the aircraft the electronic systems and the bombs and missiles and working with the industry that are working within development those weapon systems so that the 3 Air force logistic centers I've commanded one of them here in Georgia the other one is at Oklahoma City that's Tanker Air force base the third is in Salt lake city and it's at Hill Air force base and so between the 3 centers we maintain a close relationship with the product centers that develop and buy the new equipment

Richard Warner

So the vendors are Lockheed...

Tom Owen

Lockheed, Boeing, ...and again dozens of others but my background is that I have spent 7 years as assistant program director where I was the single manager for the C-5 program then later the C-17 program and then I was the director of the F-22 program of course C-5 and F-22 both developed and build right here in Georgia.

Richard Warner

Remember it well it's about 65 or 66 the C-5 rumbling down the runway for the first time and how can they take it off the ground? Amazing. Why does the military move people so much?

Tom Owen

I think that one of the reasons is that it helps to develop the diversity that you need and I have really learnt to appreciate that if you don't have that diversity then maybe someone might get the mindset that people that don't look like me, people that don't have the same experience as me, lived in the same places as me maybe they are not as effective as me and that's certainly not true. And one of the benefits that I've had as a career logistician, is I've worked in both the operational commands as a flight line maintenance officer launching day in day out our bombers, our tankers, our fighters, right there on the flight line and then later working in the air staff in the Pentagon setting policy for those weapon systems and then having been at three of the Air logistic centers where we are doing the heavy long term depot maintenance and setting the inspection standards for those weapon systems.

Richard Warner

Diversity...at first when we were going there I thought well diversity in what I learned going from all this places makes me a more valuable asset.

Tom Owen

Yes

Richard Warner

But what you are saying is no it's really the ability to work with all kinds of people in all kinds of situations.

Tom Owen

It's both of those. it's diversity in your own skill set as well as diversity understanding the value of the acquisition work force and I happen to be one of those people that's some what diverse and that am certified as both in acquisition officer as well as containment officer. So that's probably a little more the reason that am so big on having that diversity of experience.

Richard Warner

When you go into places your job to fix it to change it to work with those people and get the vision.

Tom Owen

That's a good question. I've had jobs where I go in and clearly it is in a troubled organization. And am charged...

Richard Warner

Besides the military system which is designed to minimize that.

Tom Owen

Yes. and you go into a troubled organization and your first week your first month is a very different month than if you go into an organization that is rolling along doing very well and if you have a career as long as mine then you will have opportunities to go into very successful organizations as well as very trouble organizations and I've personally I've enjoyed having the challenge of both.

Richard Warner

Do you know going into a troubled organization that that's what it is?

Tom Owen

I have had full knowledge of that and you wouldn't always know that that's the case but yes I've known that. Another troubled organization I had the privilege of standing up a new wing one time where was a new airplane had never been operationally fielded before and so we were standing up a new wing you walk in and there's an empty building and there's no airplanes on the flight line and you start getting ready from that point awaiting the arrival of the first airplane getting desks and telephones and radios and ...

Richard Warner

That's all exciting...you kind of build it within your image to some extent.

Tom Owen

Yes

Richard Warner

Back to that troubled situation or a challenge situation and it is an opportunity. What's your style what do you do when you get in there? What's your first couple of weeks like?

Tom Owen

My first couple of weeks was getting to know people and that doesn't change whether your going into a successful organization or going into a trouble organization but I get to know the people and start making assessments as to who the successful people are that need to remain on the team. Who maybe is just mal-assigned and there a very smart person technically component but we've been asking them to do something that's not

right in their skill set at this point and time and then perhaps there's others who just simply need to go find another job somewhere else. So am listening to people and making that determination especially in a troubled organization.

Richard Warner

Can you fire somebody in the military?

Tom Owen

It's an interesting process. I'll tell you the process that I use is after I've made those determinations I will look and see who might better serve somewhere else and then over the next some number of months some of those people will naturally move away and perhaps nobody will know other than me whether that person moved because it was a voluntary move it was a natural move don't like to see public firings as a normal course of practice it's just not a good thing because in almost any case that individual has good training has good education and they can be more productive if you find somewhere else for them.

Richard Warner

Is this you know in private industry there are so many different ways that a company convey to employees. Say we want you were gonna move you over here and up were gonna move you out of here and out in the military is it the same process no matter where you go?

Tom Owen

I'd say it's very similar to what you describe and frequently what I found is that people there not real satisfied where they are they know that maybe they would be better served and be able to better serve if they move somewhere else. But again that's the exception by and large my experience and as you mentioned I've moved around a lot and I've been officer in charge, squad commander, group commander, director and center commander of a lot of organizations and that's really is the exception. By and large you move into an organization and my experience is they are performing well and the challenge that I have had is just how do you take that good organization and move them to the next level. One of my favorite books that I had read several years ago was good to great.

Richard Warner

Awesome! Jim Collins.

Tom Owen

It's just a wonderful book and I wouldn't say that am a disciple of that book but...

Richard Warner

Do you know any level five leaders?

Tom Owen

I've known a few yes.

Richard Warner

Who would you say in your career has served that role?

Tom Owen

One, in fact is in Atlanta native, at least he is a native now, is retires General Al Hanson. He was my boss at headquarters air force logistics command when he was the 4 star there several years earlier he was a 2 star in the Pentagon and the early 1980's when I was there and General Hanson had a very good way about being able to take an organization that was performing well and that was air force logistics command in the 1980's and move it to the next higher level. this was in the Reagan era and there was ample funding and the challenge was how can we make ourselves bigger and stronger using that money wisely to cause that iron curtain to come down and we succeeded and I think the men and women in Air force material command helped with that.

Richard Warner

That was the Reagan era. What era are we in now?

Tom Owen

We are in the Bush era.

Richard Warner

We are in the Bush era but I mean even bigger than that in terms of what direction you feel like its going. What era are we in?

Tom Owen

That's been an item of discussion. I've heard people say are we what era are we in is this 1945? Is this 1950 or is this the 1980's? And if what I'm saying is you take those 3 eras in particular and run the clock forward in other words are we just about to complete a big war? Have we completed the big war and now we are trying to move on to something else or are we fighting some war that has not yet fully materialized and we haven't declared victory on that. And I suppose there's lots of room for argument in any one of those 3 phases about where we really are right now.

Richard Warner

'45 the war ended we didn't want any we were tired of it we dismantled we down sized and then career and then the cold war.

Tom Owen

Then career came right around the corner.

Richard Warner

So what do you think? Is that history repeats itself in different flavor?

Tom Owen

It's good subject for discussion and debate but if I had to pick one I would say were in the 1980's. Although it's a different war I would say its an era where were fighting a protracted conflict like we were in the cold war and we cant back down from that protracted conflict and there is a way we can get to a victory on the far side of this but now's not the time that we should be backing off.

Richard Warner

I would think that you are in you collectively, the military is in a difficult spot because in 1941 there is a readily identifiable enemy, readily identifiable course, a set outcome somebody is gonna win.

Tom Owen

Yes.

Richard Warner

And now what you've got in more modern times is something much more vague. It makes it more difficult to make your case.

Tom Owen

It certainly is and as a person who grew up inner town and I suppose many towns around the country and we had air raids and as a young child we'd go out and sit...

Richard Warner

Where was this?

Tom Owen

Southern New Mexico. We had an air force base in my town and we had missiles silos outside the town and so we would do through these drills and you knew who your enemy was. In this case you are absolutely right Richard the enemy is a little tougher to identify and it's not so much a uniformed member wearing a certain patch on their sleeves as it is something a little bit tougher to identify. Very difficult era that we are in right now.

Richard Warner

If we get a CEO in this show one of the fruitful topics we ever seem to go to is there number one challenge is finding good people. Given that dynamic, how hard it is to find good people this days coming out of college to become career officers?

Tom Owen

That's an exciting subject for the air force and something am very proud of. My previous assignment to coming to Robbins Air force Base was the headquarters for Air education and training command where again I was director of logistics installations and missions support there, But that command is also responsible for recruiting all of the enlisted all of the officers, doctors, lawyers for our air force and we've been very successful in the air

force at recruiting high quality young people that want to join the service as well as retaining those once we have them.

Richard Warner

What motivates them?

Tom Owen

Well, there is a concept called you recruit the individual and you retain the family. And we understand that and so despite we have phase called pers-tempo the personnel tempo and we have been stressed if you think about it since desert shield desert storm in the 1990 1991, for about 17 or 18 years our United States Air force has been fully diploid engaged in either dropping bombs, hauling cargo, providing humanitarian relief to people that are in need consistently through that period of time. Today our airlift in Iraq and Afghanistan is flying 200 sorties a day providing relief for and providing supplies to all the diploid forces over there.

Richard Warner

Many of those who are there were part of reserves never expecting to be a part of that particularly for this period of time. What impact does that have on the ability to recruit people for the reserves now?

Tom Owen

Well the reserves actually continue to succeed in meeting their recruiting goals and a number of people leave active duty and then join the reserves or the National Guard and then a number of people come in directly as enlisted members or officers into the reserves. Your right it has increased the challenge but again the numbers that I see show that both the active component as well as the reserve component in the air force is continuing to meet their recruiting and retention goals.

Richard Warner

I did a little research on Robbins Air force base there was a Brigadier General Warner Robbins never knew this he developed the way that the Air core catalogues that supply which is still used today hence this great honor of naming the facility for him. People don't realize how big this place is. Go to Google and look it up from the air view it's huge.

Tom Owen

It is. It's great instillation we have around 23 to 25000 people that come to work there everyday. Roughly 13 to 14 thousand of those people are civil servants. They wear the same uniform that you do and but they are public servants working for the federal government. We have about 6 or 7000 thousand people that are uniformed military members such as myself and then we have about another 2 to 3000 that are contractors that and that number is one that will surge up and down a little bit more and that's one of the tools we use that act as a flex tool for us so that as work load increases we are heavily industrial operation and sometimes we don't know what some of the modifications or

some of the work that's coming up and we can flex up a little bit and hire some additional contractors and then those people we can let them go giving them appropriate notice.

Richard Warner

Does it pay well?

Tom Owen

The overall pay I'd say is comparable what we pay for the contractors and for the civil servants but that's one of the exciting things about being at Robbins Air force base. We are in Rural middle Georgia about 15 to 20 miles of Macon Georgia. Our annual payroll was 1.2 billion dollars. We are the largest single side industrial complex in the state of Georgia and that draws a lot of attention to us but you talked about recruiting and it's not just recruiting uniformed members it's recruiting those 13 - 14 thousand civilians that we need everyday. One of the most exciting things that I've been part of in my 2 years as commander at Warner Robbins LC is establishing some really effective partnerships with local education institutions including Macon state college, Mercer, an Middle Georgia Technical College just to name a few and we get together with those institutions as well as others and we have a thing called workforce 21. And I have my staff making forecasts as far out into the future as we can about what our requirements would be and then we go out and we work with the technical schools and we say you know what we probably don't need as many structural mechanics right now we see more work coming in composites rather than conventional aluminum alloys. We go to Georgia Tech and Mercer and explain to them we need more software people 15 20 years ago we might hire 1 or 2 software people a year we are hiring 30-40 a year now.

Richard Warner

With the big software facility that's being built there...

Tom Owen

Absolutely! We just have congressional appropriations for 22 million dollars software support facility and that facility has broken ground it will take about 18 months and really we already have 3 software support facilities but the demand for the support for today's mission is greater than we can meet with that. So this facility will be right in the middle of those so we are tying them all together.

Richard Warner

And your not gonna be there for it.

Tom Owen

I was there for the ground breaking and again as the director of logistics for the command maybe I can work a way for an invitation back for the ribbon cutting when that great facility is delivered to us Robbins Air force base.

Richard Warner

Am curious... your career... Major General. Do you have any input in where you wind up going? Do you have anything to say about that or?

Tom Owen

Actually not that's one of the missions where most people think oh well you a general and you get your way. That's not the case but I've been very privileged my family and I as you said have had 20 something assignments we've never had a bad assignment but we've been assigned overseas we've been assigned in the Pentagon but again am really please being here is Georgia to say that we've been assigned here 3 times which is more than anywhere else and more years than anywhere else and we are very happy here our children were educated in the public schools here and its been very good to us and we love Georgia and being part of the Georgia system.

Richard Warner

Well Warner Robbins is gonna miss you. Looking forward to it?

Tom Owen

We are looking forward if you're asking looking forward to the move I can say more than any other move looking in the rear view mirror will be a sad day on the 7th of August .

Richard Warner

Major General Tom Owen, as the commander of the Warner Robbins Air logistic center. Great to have you with us that you so much.

Tom Owen

Richard, thank you. I've enjoyed it and thank you for inviting me here.

Richard Warner

Best to you and thank you for watching. You can catch a replay of this show in Atlanta on the radio WCFO 1160AM you can also listen in on I-tunes just do a search on the term Georgia's Business and you can also sound off to me directly at RichardWarner.com. Now for all of us here at Georgia Public Broadcasting I am Richard Warner thanks for watching and until next week don't sell yourself short.