

A Word from Willie—March 25 Update

Society of Wild Weasels Newsletter

March 2025



CINCWW's Corner

Fellow Weasels,

This March edition marks the first time that JJ Jerakis is our new Word from Willie Editor, congrats and thanks JJ for taking this on. We have a great edition that JJ and others have planned for you. One of the Air Force's newest Major Generals Akshai "Abu" Gandhi has an interview on his career and especially being a recent Wing CC in the Middle East. Kudos for those Weasels that joined us in the "Most Memorable Mission" Podcast. We had about 8 great stories, while these missions in this case were mostly combat related, we need to remember that all missions are what we are trying to capture! Look for another one in June. 29 March will be Vietnam Veteran's recognition day and to our Vietnam veterans thank you for what you did and still do for our country. I have learned so much of your individual courage, innovation and patriotism!

We will be advertising for a vote on the Wild Weasel Reunion place in the June edition of Word from Willie with the following places in mind: AF Academy, Nellis, Eglin, Luke and Shaw. If you have another place, please let us know through WildWeaselReports@gmail.com.

VR
Budman Redmond

Society of Wild Weasels Chief in Charge

YGBSM
FILO



ACES Act Engagement Plan

Thanks to everyone who sent an email supporting House Resolution H.R. 530 (VA Cancer Study). With Congressman Pluger's impassioned support, we believe we will have success in moving this bill out of subcommittee. H.R. 530, the ACES Act was rolled out at today's Disability Assistance & Memorial Affairs (DAMA) subcommittee. Between Congressman Pfluger's eloquent defense of the ACES Act in the face of VA skepticism and Andy "Pablo" Shurtleff's compelling personal testimony about his stage 4 kidney cancer fight, it became apparent to those of us in attendance that it appears as though H.R. 530 will move forward.

Video of DAMA meeting: 27:24 minutes Congressman Pfluger. At 36:17 he introduces Col Andy "Pablo" Shurtleff.

<https://veterans.house.gov/calendar/eventsingle.aspx?EventID=6670>

So, what comes next?

The DAMA will reconvene in what is called a "Mark-up Session" in April. Currently, the week of 7 APR and 28-30 APR favor a mark-up session. The mark-up is the next gate. It's where DAMA members vote up/down on each bill. An "up" vote by a simple majority sends H.R. 530 to the full House Veteran Affairs Committee (HVAC). We will have more information to share when we get to that threshold.

For now, **we are ceasefire on the MACH email campaign**. Gringa will have a sense as to how we did on this targeted email round of the DAMA. My sense from corridor conversations with Leg Aldes today is that MACH fully made H.R. 530 email visible. I call that a mission success.

We may not need an email push for the DAMA mark-up. But, as you might guess, MACH may need a multi-week push oriented on the full HVAC. Tonight, more emails were sent to obtain office calls with other lawmakers & Leg. Aides regarding the ACES Act.

VR

Budman



F-100 Wild Weasel Leading the Way

Medical Background from Quack Bear

(1) The AMIC committee of the River Rats participated in a recent podcast. Two parts, one each on High-G RSI and Cancer.

Part 1 -- High-G RSI

[10% True Podcast - River Rats Presentation: High G Risk](#)

Part 2 -- Aircrew Cancer

[10% True Podcast - Aircrew Cancers with Col "Aztec" Alcazar](#)

An important point to be made regarding cancer in military aviators is that the studies have shown clearly that we are in a high-risk group being susceptible to prostate cancer. So, when you have "the discussion" with your primary provider about how you should conduct screening for this very common disease, be sure to tell him/her that as a military aviator, you are in a high-risk category, same as those with positive family history, African-Americans and others. Speaking as the Weasel Quack, I believe this means that you should be having annual PSA blood tests for as long as you have a life expectancy of at least 10 years. Don't let anybody talk you out of annual PSA's by referring to now outdated USPSTF recommendations, which have recently been revised again.

(2) The MACH coalition (Military Aviators Coalition for Health) was recently organized by Vince "Aztec" Alcazar, WW# 2891. The coalition continues to expand, now over a dozen aviation organizations. It is currently working closely with Congress, trying to get the ACES Act (Aviation Cancer Examination Study) into law. The proposed bills have new numbers in the 119th Congress, namely HR.530 in the House and S.201 in the Senate. The Wild Weasels have been quite instrumental in sending supporting emails to various legislative aids when so directed by Aztec and Budman. Thank you to all who have faithfully stayed on his wing. We're making progress, and flooding the zone with emails when requested by Aztec definitely helps.

(3) The SoWW website medical link has the latest information.

<https://wildweasels.org/medical/>

VR

Phil "Quack Bear" Steeves

Fallen Wild Weasels

Robert J. Reisenwitz, WW #843, Pilot, F-105G, 28 Aug 2024

Charles O. Coogan, WW #543, Staff, F-105F/G, 26 Jan 2025

Our Condolences to their families, friends, and brothers in arms. Hand Salute! Rest in Peace!

L.A. Bud

Membership Update

New Members

We welcome the following new members:

Louis Bloom, WW #2903, Pilot, F-16
George Gardner, WW #2904, Maintainer
Kai Sommer, WW #2905, Maintainer
Clifford “Jeeves” Butler, WW #2906, Intel
Michael “Flash” McVay, WW #2907, Pilot, F-35
Justin Newman, WW #2908, Pilot, F-16
Mark “Quatro” Tappendorf, WW #2909, Pilot, F-35
Chris “Bruiser” Brown, WW #2910, Pilot, F-35
Jacob “Strange” Harrold, WW #2911, Pilot, F-35
Daniel “Thrash” Brom, WW #2912, Pilot, F-16
Dalton Scheel, WW #2913, Pilot, F-16
Konan Parkhurst, WW #2914, Pilot, F-35
Will Fleming, WW #2915, Pilot, F-35
Chris Finkenstadt, WW #2916, Pilot, F-16
Chris Rivers, WW #2917, Maintainer
Colton “Padre” Priest, WW #2918, Pilot, F-16
Brian Davis, WW #2919, Pilot, F-16
Craig Gourley, WW #2020, Honorary Member

L.A. Bud

Surviving Family Members

If you know of family members who qualify, have them contact us at:

LABudF4G@gmail.com

L.A. Bud

Interview

Major General Akshai Gandhi

Interview with David Melton

21 February 2025



Subject's Biography:

Major General Akshai M. Gandhi is a distinguished graduate of the United States Air Force Academy, commissioning in May 1990. He later graduated from the Euro-NATO Joint Jet Pilot Training Program (ENJJPT) at Sheppard Air Force Base, Texas, earning his pilot's wings in October 1991. He is a command pilot with 4600 hours in the F-16, including over 750 combat hours. He has served with several fighter squadrons over his career, eventually commanding the ANG's 157th Fighter Squadron and later its parent wing, the 169th Fighter Wing. He has also commanded the 378th Air Expeditionary Wing. In November 2023, he entered his present assignment as the Assistant Deputy Chief of Staff, Operations (A3), Headquarters U.S. Air Force, the Pentagon, Arlington, VA. He recently received his second star.

Tell us about yourself. What is your background and how did you come to be an Air Force officer and fighter pilot?

I was born in the UK. My parents were born and raised under British colonial rule, so they moved around the Empire and we lived in the South of England, in Winchester. My next-door neighbor was retired RAF, and that's where I figure the bug to fly came from. We emigrated to the States in '74, so I grew up in California, in the East San Francisco Bay Area.

I joined the Civil Air Patrol in the beginning of my seventh-grade year, which was something that I stuck with all the way through high school. It was very formative and influential, as far as shaping where I wanted to go. With them, I went to an encampment at Nellis in the Summer of '81, and watched all these fighters out on the ramp: A-10s, F-4s, F-16s, F-111s. The Thunderbirds did an arrival show in T-38s and then took us to the Thunderbird theater. I knew that was what I wanted to do.

I got scholarships from the Civil Air Patrol to solo in a glider and then in a powered airplane. Eventually I ended up working for a fixed base operator at the local airport in the East Bay. I took flying lessons and got my private pilot's license the summer before my senior year in high school. I was able to go to the Air Force Academy. I'm not so sure I'd want to repeat it, but I've never regretted the experience. Between the Civil Air Patrol and the Air Force Academy, I met people who have been friends, mentors, confidants, and just great people throughout the entire time. It started there, and then I was fortunate enough to get selected go to ENJJPT.

What can you tell us about the ENJJPT program and how it compares to the normal UPT program?

The book answer is that you do more flying and less sims at ENJJPT. It was a very fighter-focused program. If you went to Sheppard and you weren't fighter qualified, you weren't getting your wings. You knew you were probably going to a fighter. They kept a few back as first assignment instructor pilots - FAIPs, but otherwise you were going to go to a fighter.

That came to a grinding halt right after Desert Storm, where the Air Force basically downsized from thirty-six fighter wing equivalents to twenty-four. We cut a third of the fighter force, almost overnight. I got sent into what's called a "banked fighter" program, just like 80% of my class. That meant they were going to send you to a non-flying assignment while everything got sorted out, and then they would bring you back in through the pipeline to a fighter unit.

How did you feel about that after just finishing ENJJPT?

At first it felt like the end of the world. I had just gotten my wings, but now I didn't get to fly. In fact, they called us penguins, because we had wings but couldn't fly.

One of my mentors, who was also my DO there, had been a flight commander in an F-16 squadron during Desert Storm. He said, "I know this probably feels like the end of the world, but ten years from now, you're going to look back at this assignment and say it helped you out, and it's going to have no negative impact on your career." He was right. It certainly helped me. It was a great assignment. It set me up because they taught me how a fighter squadron runs. I was taught all sorts of things that served me well later in my career, both in the air and on the ground. A lot of those folks became lifelong friends.

Your first assignment was just after the end of the Cold War, and right after Desert Storm. Was there any sense of missing out on the chance to play in the big game?

You never really wish for a war, but if there's one on, then you don't want to be left out. I never thought I missed my opportunity with Desert Storm.

When I got to my first fighter assignment in Korea, the tensions were high. I didn't know if we were going to go to war in Korea or not. While I was over there, things started picking up in Bosnia. At first, I thought I was on the wrong side of the planet, but then I ended up in Italy, at Aviano. Then Allied Force kicked off.

By that point in time in my career, I was a forward air controller in the F-16, and a flight lead and a mission commander. I was slated to get the IP upgrade, except that was interrupted by the war. There were 78 days of pretty heavy air combat. That's where I had my first real combat sortie. I had done some patrolling in Bosnia where I was armed and took all my gear, but there was really no truly effective threat. When Allied Force kicked off though, it was for real.

At that time, the Serbians had one of the most sophisticated integrated air defenses set up. I remember my first combat sortie, flying down the Adriatic getting out of the tanker. I had all the butterflies and nervousness. I think that's normal and to be expected when you're going into something that you've never done before and you hope you can cut it. When the guns started shooting, and all that stuff just went away, and training took over. I was fortunate to learn that I did have what it takes to be able to do this.

I led several strikes into Serbia proper. They were, unfortunately, not well defended by air-to-air, because shooting down some MiGs would have been nice, but they were definitely defended from the ground.

When was your first Wild Weasel Assignment?

My first Wild Weasel assignment, formally, was when I switched to the South Carolina Air Guard.

After my assignment in Italy, I went to Cannon in Clovis, New Mexico. I had met my wife in Korea. She was a dentist in the Air Force and was in Germany while I was in Italy. We got married during our Europe tour and received a joint spouse tour to Cannon. I was thrilled to stay operational and we were thrilled just to be living with each other.

After that, we were looking at a really a difficult decision to separate from the active-duty Air Force and transfer to the Air National Guard. It was a family decision. My wife had a three-year commitment. She served well over six and she was ready to transition to a private practice, which is not a very portable thing. I was looking at some staff tours and wanted to keep flying. We gave the Guard a try and it worked out really well for us.

When I got to McEntire, to the 169th Fighter Wing, the fighter squadron, the 157th Fighter Squadron was at the time the only SEAD unit in the Reserve component. I was fortunate enough to get picked up by those guys or, as I like to say, they were dumb enough to hire me. That was my first true Wild Weasel assignment. However, during Allied Force, we were shot at by SAMs, and I was able to take out an SA-6 in Kosovo with a GBU-12.

You have a huge number of hours in the F-16. How did you manage that?

Back in the Cold War we had a very big force structure in the active component. After Desert Storm and the big draw down, the Guard and Reserve became operational reserves. That transition first took place in the '90s. After Iraqi Freedom we had a high commitment of rotational forces and that's what solidified us as operational reserves. If you were in a Guard or Reserve Squadron, you had the opportunity to fly a lot. I wasn't interested in flying for the airlines, so I stayed full time in the South Carolina Air Guard on an active flying status for 20 years, with many deployments.

You have had two wing commands. One a fighter wing, which is a long-term assignment, and the other an Air Expeditionary Wing, which is a short-term assignment. Can you tell us about those two experiences and how they are different?

Wing command is an incredible opportunity and it's an immense responsibility. At the time, a fighter wing command involved a very garrison-focus. We had the standard Air Force structure underneath it with all the housekeeping things of running the air base, running the airfield, integrating with the community, taking care of the Airmen, taking care of their families, and taking care of tenant units. We are training for our federal mission, growing our Airmen, and making sure that we have enough qualified folks to keep the organization strong.

You do a lot of the same in a deployed Air Expeditionary Wing, but your focus is different, because you are there for a purpose. The United States has deployed you over there to execute some sort of mission. In our case, the 378 AEW was at Prince Sultan Air Base in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. We were guests on a Royal Saudi Air Force Base. At McEntire, I had control over how we were going to do something on the installation. At PSAB I needed to work with our host nation partners on almost everything.

I found the Saudis were fantastic hosts. I had a great relationship with the Saudi two-star base commander. He was also their Wing Commander and an officer I had a great amount of respect for. He was actually pretty visionary in what he was doing for the Royal Saudi Air Force. He made it so I never worried about the safety of our personnel. If we ever had a problem, the Saudis were quite swift at dealing with it and helping us out.

Our focus was on generating combat power for the Central Command. We did missions in various parts of the Middle East. We did a lot of partner nation integration where our Air Force works with coalition air forces to build trust and to help grow the capabilities and interoperability of their air forces. A lot of them look to the US Air Force as an exemplar and want to work with and learn from us.

Tell us about your current assignment in A3.

What does Air Force Operations not touch? We pretty much touch everything. It is a wide set of responsibilities. Coming from my background in fighters, it has been very insightful with a steep learning curve and an awesome growth opportunity to see what else goes on to make our Air Force tick.

What are you working to accomplish?

We're focused on making sure that our Air Force is best postured to meet the requirements of our national defense strategy. We're looking at the way we're organized. We're looking at the way we present forces. We're looking at the way we conduct operations. At the same time, we're looking at where we need to grow and evolve our capabilities.

What excites me is that we have a team that is focused on posturing the United States Air Force to best support the joint force. We're making changes that are needed to meet the new strategic situation. Our Air Force senior leadership, from the Chief of Staff on down, talk about several key inflection points. The first big inflection point was coming out of Vietnam. This is where we found out that a Third World air force with minimal training was able to take on our Air Force, because we'd been focused on the whole Nuclear War mentality. We weren't quite prepared for what we needed to do on the conventional front. This is where we got into the big build-up through the 1980s. This culminated with Desert Storm which illustrated the return on the investment. The four-day ground war was possible because of the impact of air power. We were wildly successful, probably beyond most folk's wildest dreams.

We then shifted from a large standing military where we had a superpower to contend with to being the sole superpower. We got into this rotational situation and we shifted from war fighting effectiveness to garrison efficiency.

9/11 was the next inflection point. We had to reset and go after counter-insurgency and lower intensity conflict. We focused on that almost exclusively to the detriment of some other capabilities.

Today, we're seeing the rearmament of Russia and the rise of China with China being our pacing challenge. We're looking at the way we've been doing business, and the proliferation of a lot of disruptive technologies, such as cyber or ballistic missiles that can now hold our bases at risk. Sure, in the past the terrorists or insurgents could lob some rockets at us, and they may get lucky and hit something and cause some damage or inflict some casualties, but it was relatively small scale and pretty limited in scope. Compare that to the Iranian attacks back in April of last year. The night of April 13th was a great day for the United States Air Force. We showed some serious capability, but it also illustrated that bases are at risk, as is our ability to project power. We are reorganizing our Air Force to be able to meet these challenges because that's what the nation needs. That's how we're going to support the national defense strategy. To be a part of these changes and have the opportunity to figure out that problem is pretty exciting. It's really neat to see people from all walks of life, some of whom are absolutely brilliant, jumping on and tackling this problem.

Looking back on your career, do you have a favorite assignment, a favorite moment, or a favorite thing about being in the Air Force?

I'm always hesitant to try and say what my favorite assignment was, because I don't know that I had a bad assignment. There were some places I liked living more than others. There were some jobs I liked more than others, but as I look back, I realize I've been fortunate and had some great opportunities. Your responsibilities change as you move up in rank and position. I loved being a Squadron Commander, and I thought that was the best job I could possibly have, until I became a Wing Commander.

I would say it's the opportunity to command Airmen. That is probably one of the things I've enjoyed the most. It's about being able to set the direction of where we're going and then unleash the talents of the people who are in your charge. My job is to set a direction and provide guidance, but not get in their way. I want to let them loose to tackle the problems, set reasonable limits, provide the appropriate feedback, but then let them run. We'll come up with better solutions by unleashing the power of our amazing Airmen.

General George Patton said "Never tell people how to do something. Tell them what to do and let them surprise you with their ingenuity." I try to keep that in the back of my mind when thinking about how we're going to do something. I think the first thing to recognize when you're in any leadership position is that it's not about you, it's about your organization. It's about the people in your organization. It's about the people who are going to execute the job that you're tasked to do, because you're not going to do it yourself. I'm of the George C. Marshall school of thought. I do my level best to avoid using the words "I", "me" or "mine", unless it's something that went sideways, and then it's my responsibility to own. It's our team that gets the job done. It can't happen without that team. It can't happen without the people making it go. I want them to have ownership of the success, because it's all of them collectively that achieved the success.

What about after this current assignment? Do you have any idea where you'd like to go next? Or do you think about that?

I'm going to leave that to the powers that be. At this point, I'm pushing 35 years of commissioned service. I've had a fantastic run. It's really not about what I want to do, it's about where the Air Force thinks what I have to offer can be best leveraged. The one thing I really enjoy about being in the Air Force is that I'm serving something bigger than myself. Just like any job, there are high points and there are low points. There are days that you just want to bash your nugget against the wall, and other days that are just so incredibly uplifting. The thing that gets me out of bed in the morning is the fact that I think I'm being given the opportunity to make a difference that betters our Great Nation.

Is that what you value most: making a difference to better our nation?

I think so. At some point in time, we all have to take off the uniform, move on, and provide opportunities to the folks behind us. To get out of the way and let them run things. If there's something that I could do to continue being an advocate for what our nation values, that's what I'd like to do.



Gen Gandhi briefing the Troops!!

2024 Funding

Available balance \$ 69,422 down from \$72,825 last quarter.



Links of Interest

Earlier this month, USAFE and Air Forces Africa had an exercise named..... wait for it “Turbo Weasel.” It was named after the 480th FS out of Spangdahlem AB, Germany. Part one was this month and part two in early April.

[TURBOOO Weasel](#)

SoWW History

[Virtual Museum on the SoWW website](#)

Reunions

River Rats Annual Reunion; Pensacola late Oct '25

[River Rats - Pensacola - 22 Oct 25](#)

Next Full Issue

May 2025 Hollywood Hanton interview by Dave Melton about his career and POW experience
Aug 2025 update will be an interview Knight Prevandar the 79th CC
“Most Memorable Mission” stories from Feb 25 zoom call
2025 Reunions

If you have feedback please drop us a line at WildWeaselReports@gmail.com

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