



CONR - 1 AF/AFNORTH

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Don't read this commentary—it's just a sobering personal journal entry

By Maj. Gen. Garry C. Dean, CONR-1AF (AFNORTH) commander

TYNDALL AIR FORCE BASE, Fla.

Wednesday, Dec. 22 – Holiday cheer seems to be permeating our entire organization. Judged the office decorating contest. Tied up loose ends with my directors before most head off on well-deserved holiday leave. Drafted commander's commentary for January issue of base newspaper.

Thursday, Dec. 23 – Christmas spirit is in abundance! Command Element brought in wonderful treats for all to enjoy. Visited the AOC as NORAD prepares to 'Track Santa' on Christmas Eve. Picked up some last minute gifts for the family. Authorized early release to the entire 1st Air Force team to get a head start on holiday celebrations.

Friday, Dec. 24 – SCREECHING HALT to holiday cheer. Notified of the sudden passing of one of my officers. What? Is this for real?? How can this happen to a 43-year old teammate and his family? Why did this have to happen to his family on Christmas Eve??



To be perfectly honest, I don't keep a daily journal. But if I did, the above three entries would be correct. Just as I was in full throttle with holiday spirit, just as I was about to enjoy some down time with my own family here at Tyndall, on Christmas Eve I was notified of the death of Maj. Rodney Dean, an Army liaison officer assigned to my organization. It was at that moment I realized once again how the 'Reality 101' moments of life suddenly remind us how precious life really is.

As a commander, I am given an extraordinary amount of responsibility, and I cherish the role of being a commander. But one of the hardest – scratch that – *the* hardest thing about being a commander is having the heartbreaking task of breaking the news to family members or informing coworkers about the loss of a loved one, a friend, or a wingman.

We lost Rodney Dean much too soon. He was a young, vibrant, dedicated and devoted air defense officer whose life came to a sudden and unexpected end on a day that is normally reserved for happiness and good cheer. And despite being an avid runner in outstanding physical condition many of us only dream of, Rodney passed away from a sudden aneurism in an area very difficult to detect.

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Major Dean's death gave me a reason to stop in my tracks and realize just how precious and fleeting life on earth is. It made me count my blessings, hug my daughters, kiss my wife, and tell them how much I love them. But it also gave me reason, despite the difficulties and challenges we face each day, to be thankful for another day to serve, to help, to grow and to love.

The AFNORTH family experienced a few deaths in 2010, and although there is never a 'good' day to bid farewell to a loved one, my heart broke for Rodney's family, especially his 8-year old daughter, whose poem saying goodbye to her father brought a tearful eye to everyone in attendance at his funeral.

My original intent for a commander's commentary was to write about the camaraderie CONR-1AF (AFNORTH) shares with numerous interagencies – organizations like the Federal Aviation Administration, the Department of Homeland Security, Civil Air Patrol, the U.S. Secret Service, and countless others. But my intent changed after attending Rodney's funeral. His death made me realize that every relationship I share with others is an important one – not just those of our interagency partners, but with the very personnel who work for me; our fellow Airmen in the 325th Fighter Wing; my direct chain of command at Air Combat Command and U.S. Northern Command; my brethren fighter pilots throughout the Air Force; and most importantly, my relationship with my beautiful family.

I'm sure 2011 will have its share of huge successes as well as challenging failures. As long as we stick together as Airmen and Wingman, take care of each other in times of need, and continue to cherish each precious, passing moment, then facing those challenges and losses will not seem insurmountable.

I encourage you to look at each day differently. Heed the advice of famous American author Augustine 'Og' Mandino who once wrote, "Treat everyone you meet today as if they might pass away at midnight. Extend to them all the care, kindness and understanding you can and do it with no thought of any reward. Your life will never be the same again."

Friday, Jan. 28 – Looks like 2011 is off to a great start. Remembered Major Dean today, and thanked him for his service to our nation and his positive outlook on life. Rekindled my positive attitude and perspective as I lead America's 1st Air Force in defense of this great nation.