

Professional Reflection

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How did I get here?

Coming out high school, I wanted to go to college far away from Ohio, but my parents didn't think that was such a good idea. So, in a rebellious move at 18 years old, I drove to the United States Army recruiter and chose to join. My parents were shocked and a little upset as the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq were all over the television in 2009. Even on the day I was shipping out to basic training, I wondered if I made the right decision or if it was out of pettiness. That rash decision I made, though there have been times where I disliked the decision, it has been the most important and best decision I made in my life.

The military gave me the tools to succeed even once I left the service. And I'm not talking about the normal drivel given by military officers, movies, commercials, or politicians of "honor, selfless service, courage, discipline," among others. Yes, I probably learned some discipline in the military but also, I went in as a kid and grew up. My 20's were given to the military but just like any other young adult, I matured. No, the military gave me the set of skills that can't be replicated in college. These skills I learned onboard a manned aircraft that looks like a civilian aircraft, deployed to multiple locations from Central America to Africa, and from the Middle East to Asia all while creating intelligence products for commanders and assisting friendly forces to avoid casualties. From a mission supervisor I became a flight instructor and eventually a standardization instructor teaching other soldiers to be aircrew members. Additionally, I maintained the flight program on the enlisted side of my units to be approved by the United States Army and its higher commands.

But, during the entire time I felt as though something was missing. I had the awards, the positive reviews, the respect of the command teams, and the great friendships that I will never find again. However, I missed being able to make my own decisions in life and couldn't quite

shake the feeling of frustration of carrying out blind decisions given to the units I was in. So, after re-enlisting two more times, I finally decided after eight years, to leave the military and see what the civilian side of life was like as an adult. I spent 6 months golfing and being back in the United States before I decided to seek a professional position.

The military had given me the benefit of being an airborne sensor operator as well as a geospatial intelligence analyst. I had decided at the same time I was bored with spending 1/3 of the day in a metal can in the sky. So, I applied for multiple positions as a geospatial or full motion video imagery intelligence analyst. A few positions responded offering work in Africa and the Middle East. On to Tampa I flew to meet the management in the company and fly back to the Middle East as I had done in the military but unlike the military, the decision was mine. However, as I sat in an office of Quiet Professionals LLC, one of the managers asked if I would rather go to the Philippines to work as an operator and analyst for a high-altitude reconnaissance aircraft. The decision was easy and soon I was off to the Philippines to work. I waited three months for an aircraft to arrive that was promised by to the United States government until the government finally decided it could wait no longer and ordered a stop-work notice on the prime contract company who owned the aircraft called Bear Defense.

Fortunately, I made tight friendships with the other contracting company that was there and had their aircraft onsite. Within a few months of leaving the Philippines, I was back with Leidos. I enjoyed the counter terrorism work and decided to extend my rotation to six months from the normal 3 months. See, usually on rotation you get 3 months on working, and 3 months off at home throughout the year. Once leaving, I had started to see a few news reports about this new virus in China thinking “that’s crazy, I wonder how many people will end up getting that.” A lot, it turned out to be a lot. By the time my next rotation came around in March of 2020, I

could find no flights into the Philippines and was stuck at home. Eventually, Leidos lost the contract to another company in June of 2020. That same month, the new company called and asked if I wanted to work the same position for them. It was an easy yes.

During my time home during the pandemic, I decided to go back to school since the military was going to pay for attending and on top of that they gave me a basic housing allowance. All because I signed a contract along with signing away my youth. I would have joined without the GI Bill, so I like to think I got one over on them. See, the decision to go back to school was not an easy one as I had attempted to go back to school multiple times while in the army as well as on the way out. But I was not motivated to do so, and I was young which ended up in poor performance and withdrawing from classes. But this time was different. I wanted to use the benefits I earned and be the first one from my immediate family to graduate college even if it was community college.

While working again in the Philippines I completed my Associates of Applied Science in Intelligence Operations Studies with Cochise College in December of 2020. Right before I graduated, I was contacted by an admissions recruiter at the University of Arizona saying my degree would transfer over to a program leaving me with only so many classes to finish up. Enthusiastically, I applied, was admitted, and took full course loads. In May of 2022, I completed my Bachelor of Applied Science in Intelligence and Information Operations as well as an undergraduate certificate in Information Warfare. Sometime in 2021 I was asked if I wanted to apply to the Accelerated Master's Program in International Security Studies, I quickly applied. Again, the University of Arizona had reeled me in. And I am thankful and happy that I stayed on the hook. Which is why I applied to the full ISS program upon graduating in 2022.

A perfect storm occurred for me when I decided to go back to college and accepted the position in the Philippines with the new company. Upon arriving back to the Philippines, I saw that counter terrorism was not the only line of effort anymore. Sometimes I would aid the United Nations Security Council Resolution through the United States Navy in the way of intelligence products. Furthermore, I observed a pivot in American efforts from the Middle East to the Pacific. The pivot that was initiated by President Barrack Obama seemed to finally be happening as the drawdowns in the Middle East continued. At this same time, my classes were regarding intelligence, information operations, international relations, international affairs, and security issues. Academia learned at the University of Arizona molded my intellectual growth and my job allowed me to have a front row seat in a flashpoint region during a great power competition between the United States and the People's Republic of China. All this combined has stimulated my desire to read books about international relations, grand strategy, and things such Thucydides trap.

So, what to do from here? Between my position at work and the tools given to me from the University of Arizona, I have begun to itch for further education and am looking toward starting a Doctorate program. There I can continue my intellectual growth and maybe one day help in the effort of international relations whether that is through teaching in an academic setting, writing strategic government policy, or giving guidance to policy makers by the way of intelligence products or academic sources. Today, the world needs minds to help solve the security issues with rising tensions, emerging powers, the threat of nuclear arms, and war one miscalculation away. I recently met with congressional staffers and realized they were looking for strategic ways to perform in today's world and, I realized that the minds behind the scenes such as in academia, and congressional or white house aides are what really pull the strings in

policy decisions or at least give the recommendations and tools to present solutions. Though I may not be an important piece of the puzzle in today's great power competition and may not ever be, I feel like I must try to understand it because the world is too delicate with too many threats to stand on the sides and watch it be destroyed.