



IN THEIR OWN WORDS

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When I tell people that I'm currently in the Air National Guard, waiting for my dates to go to Officer Training School and then on to flight school, their next question is almost always about my bachelor's degree (a requirement to go straight into OTS). The look of genuine surprise and confusion on their faces when I tell them I actually have a master's degree in English is almost universal. To most people, "pilot" and "English major" don't seem to have much in common and they have a hard time figuring out how I got from one to the other.

Their most common question after hearing I'm an English major is, "Oh so you're like the grammar police?" Honestly, I didn't take a single grammar class the entire six years I studied English. Language was for linguists, I'd say. Instead, I had to study history, philosophy, socioeconomics, gender dynamics, and psychoanalysis before I could even begin to understand what Virginia Woolf was on about in *To The Lighthouse*. Then, I had to become familiar with logical discourse, pacing, tone, and verbal clarity in order to explain what I understood effectively to another person in formal writing. Interestingly enough, this exact ability is highly sought by the military. As part of the application process, the Air Force gives all officer candidates a handout to pass along to the writers of the letters of recommendation in which they outline four main skills they are looking for in an officer: interpersonal skills and leadership potential, personal achievements, industry and self-discipline, and ability to communicate. They break this last point down to specifically ask, "Is the candidate an effective writer? Does his/her written word show a mastery of the conventions of English? Is the written expression clear, well organized, and forceful?" It doesn't matter how smart you are or what you know if you cannot effectively communicate it to the next guy, or the flight under you, or your commander. They want to know that you have been taught to do exactly that. After I explain all this, they usually ask me, "But what will you do exactly?" Why, I'll fly planes. Specifically, I was hired to fly the C-17 with the 172nd Airlift Wing. Most of these missions will be humanitarian missions, both foreign and domestic, with a significant portion of the flights involving transporting wounded soldiers back to the states.

Then, I really throw them off when I tell them that a career in military aviation is just a step along the path to eventually finding my way to space.

Of course, I have to explain that the third party privatization of the space industry opens up more opportunities for space travel beyond the astronaut positions that NASA offers, including opportunities for hydroponic farmers, blue collar miners, and yes, even English majors. In the words of one of my favorite authors, Carl Sagan, eventually they'll realize "they should've sent a poet" (Contact, 1997). In short, I believe this as well, because forging a new era of human understanding has almost always been at the hands of poets and writers.

The collection of data points is all very well and good, but someone will eventually have to tell us what it all means. One of my favorite skills that the study of English literature has given me, and the one I find the most valuable to my future position as a military pilot, is the ability to know what it is that I don't know. That is, the ability to critically analyze one's own understanding of a subject and find the pieces that need further explanation. In fact, I believe an English major can be taught anything, because they have learned how to learn. They gain the ability to find the exact point that things stop making sense and are adept enough to know what questions to ask in order to find the answer. And of course, when they do find their answer, they not only know what they think but why they think it. This process creates a more confident worldview that, while constantly undergoing revision, leads to a stronger sense of self and purpose.

Specifically, working with the English program at Mississippi State gave me the confidence to pursue this path. I've always known I wanted to the Air Force as a career option because of the opportunities it provided for eventual space exploration, but I wasn't sure how to get there. I had considered just enlisting and "starting from the bottom" as it were, but after a talk with one of



my professors, I started to see another path. On hearing my previous plans, she pulled me aside and basically chastised me for this decision. At first I was shocked that she felt so strongly, but over time her arguments started to make sense. I was highly educated and I was a strong powerful woman and, perhaps, I was good enough to ask for a pilot slot which would get me closer to achieving my dreams. Honestly, I hadn't even considered getting my masters in the program. I knew I didn't want to teach English, so I didn't understand why I needed to go further in that direction. I had gotten my bachelors and as far as I knew all the necessary skills I would need. Fatefully, another of my professors pushed me to apply and I'm so glad she did because what happened next probably changed my life. In graduate school I started to gain more of an appreciation for what I could achieve, more confidence in my own abilities, and the real world experience of being responsible for the students in my classes. As it turns out, my masters degree was a high selling point during my interview. Not just the degree itself, the teaching experience, or the highest possible score on both the thesis defense and exam (although these points certainly helped make my case), but also on what the program had given me, which was the ability to clearly articulate my purpose and justify my right to be in that room. I had previously done my research and knew ahead of time what type of questions they might ask. At the end of the meeting, the interviewer, visibly impressed, stated that I had given an unusually well thought out answers, to which I replied, "Well sir, I was an English major."