

How my International Experience Led to my Withdrawal from the Military

By: Kyle McLain, kmclain2@uncc.edu

When I started my first semester at UNC Charlotte in fall 2010, I declared an International Studies major and joined the AFROTC (Air Force Reserve Officers Training Corps). While in high school, I was a member of our AFJROTC and enjoyed the experience so much that I planned to commission as an Air Force officer after finishing my undergraduate degree. My International Studies major seemed to fit my career goals perfectly. To fulfil the major's language requirement, I initially chose Arabic to enhance my efficacy as a future military officer, especially with the US military's heavy involvement in the Middle East. Although, after much consideration I selected German instead, in all honesty because it seemed easier, but also the significant number of US military bases in Germany which serve as launching points for military deployments to the Middle East. I was fascinated with Germany's long and troubled history.

My sophomore year was physically and mentally taxing. On top of an 18 credit hour schedule, a part-time job and a viciously unhealthy relationship, I was competing for a slot in AFROTC's Field Training. On average I slept two hours a night, waking at 5:30 am to have three people screaming in my face while fighting to run one more lap around the track. My fellow cadets and I memorized quotes, rules, regulations, and military drill. My first-year class started with 69 people. By sophomore year it reduced to 27. When the Air Force announced selections for Field Training there were 23 of us. My hard work paid off, and I earned a slot in the four-week training program in summer 2012. Only 21 people in my class graduated Field Training.

At Field Training I got my first glimpse of what an Air Force career looked like. To my disappointment, I felt like an outsider, a black sheep which never really belonged. On my individual evaluation my commanding officer criticized my unrealistically high expectations of my peers. I witnessed a military bureaucracy awarding their highest commendations to individuals whom I could never trust with my life. I planned to become an Intelligence Officer because I love researching, collecting information and strengthening my personal knowledge. At a Field Training career fair, I attended a presentation given by an Intelligence Officer, who oversaw military drones. I watched on a television screen as he explained how the Air Force tracked every move of a supposed terrorist for six months, and with the push of a button, missiles flew down from the sky erasing everything on the screen. The chilling revelation I felt made me question the morality of my career path, yet I graduated Field Training and signed a binding contract with the Air Force.

As an extension of my academic interests, I received a scholarship to study abroad at the Goethe Institute in Göttingen, Germany during summer 2013. In addition to providing excellent language training, the Goethe Institute is a program specifically designed to integrate students from around the world. Conversations with my international friends opened my eyes to many different perspectives on global issues. One of my fellow AFROTC cadets also attended the Goethe Institute. He recounted an interesting experience while participating in a soccer game wearing his Air Force t-shirt. One of the players, who was Middle Eastern, asked him if he was in the Air Force. When my friend confirmed this, and asked the stranger how he knew the Air Force, the man solemnly responded, "They bombed my village in 1985." The story resonated within my conscience, strengthening the doubts which I failed to ignore.

The longer my studies required me to research, think and write critically, the more I questioned the validity of the Air Force's mission and dangerous, over-expansive use of the military. I researched statistics demonstrating the shocking rate of civilian casualties from drone strikes commonly written off as collateral damage. My intellectual curiosity would not allow me to follow orders when war was as easy as the push of a button. I became severely depressed and felt I had lost all control of my life. I felt trapped because I committed to a contract for an ideology in which I no longer believed. Instead of reaching out to friends, family or professional help, I tried to bury my mental issues, doubts and feelings with alcoholism. In October 2013, I attempted suicide and was institutionalized in a psychiatric ward for three days. From this soul-crushing experience I came to a profound revelation, with support from people when I needed them most, I decided to stand up for my moral values whatever the consequences.

I anxiously explained my ethical dilemma to my commanding officer. I knew if I broke my Air Force contract I would owe approximately \$11,000. Not only did he understand my point of view, but he vowed to help me find a solution. I waited until January 2014 when I received my assignment as an Intelligence Officer. After this announcement, I clearly remember the smile he directed at me informing the class about the Air Force Voluntary Discharge Program brought about by military budget cuts. When I immediately volunteered he told me, "I knew you would." Looking back, I am amazed because the last instance the Air Force let people opt out of their contracts without repercussions was in 2006. On February 28, 2014, I was honorably discharged from the military.

I studied at the Goethe Institute again in summer 2014 visiting Austria, Germany, Spain, Hungary and Serbia. I gained an enlightening perspective of myself and my place in the world because of my experiences abroad and life-long friends I made. Inspired by my international

experience I am now a History graduate student focusing on Holocaust studies, which led to my summer 2015 internship at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington D.C. I am thankful for the lessons I learned and proud to share them with everyone.