

Betsey Poore

Dr. Maxwell

April 15, 2014

Feature Article

JohnAndrew C. Felix: From St. Lucia to Sergeant First Class

JohnAndrew C. Felix, Sergeant First Class, spent the last ten years of his 20-year military career recruiting soldiers for the U.S. National Guard. Felix spent three and a half years in the Air Force after finishing high school and some college, and then transferred to the Army for another seven years so that he could progress in his career. He found that recruiting was the most rewarding responsibility he had in the military because he got to see his recruits transition from unfocused children to disciplined soldiers.

“That was the culmination of my military career because I got a chance to make a difference,” Felix said. “I had a chance to give them options that they didn’t know existed for them.”

Some of Felix’s recruits came to him because they couldn’t afford to go to college. Felix gave them an opportunity to take advantage of the National Guard’s offer to pay for a college education. Other recruits just needed a little help finding a purpose for their lives, and Felix helped these young men and women find direction. Before Felix had the opportunity to recruit for National Guard, he practiced his recruiting skills on his older brother.

While Felix was still in the Air Force, he and his brother were sitting on the terrace outside their mother’s house discussing their futures. Felix’s brother always teased him about choosing the Air Force over the army, insisting that if Felix wanted to be in “a real man’s Army”

he should transfer. His brother, a welder in New York, mentioned joining the Army, but said didn't want to do it alone.

“We made a pact,” Felix said. “He told me, ‘when it comes time for you to re-enlist, why don't you transfer to the Army?’” Then Felix and his brother could enlist together. The timing was perfect. Felix was already in the process of transferring from the Air Force to the Army. At the time, Felix's brother did not know Felix was already in the process of changing branches.

Felix loved the Air Force—citing it as his “favorite branch of all”—but it has a rule against promoting non-U.S. citizens. Felix is originally from the Caribbean country of St. Lucia. His parents were separated when he was just a year old, and he spent the majority of his childhood in St. Lucia with his paternal grandmother. But, in 1978, his parents decided it was time for him to move to the United States to meet his mother and attend school.

“While I was attending college in my junior year of high school, we went to speak to the people about going straight into the military after high school,” Felix said. Because his high school allowed him to enroll in dual-credit courses, Felix graduated with some college credits and was able to enter the Air Force with an additional rank. The Air Force was a great opportunity for Felix because he was able to make money and see the world. He got the opportunity to travel to Germany, Italy and across the U.S. repairing and building air conditioning units in older buildings. His favorite assignment was in the Tempelhof Air Force Base in Berlin.

“The base is one building that is built in the shape of an eagle. It was Hitler's headquarters,” Felix said. “Everything was encompassed in that building.” It had a movie theater, barracks, gyms, and tunnels that led to the downtown area of Berlin.

It was time for Felix to be promoted to Sergeant, but he couldn't progress until he held his citizenship for at least three years. He learned about a program in which non-U.S. citizens serving in the Army could expedite the citizenship process. In just six months, he earned his citizenship and was promoted to Sergeant. It was during this transition period that Felix made the deal with his brother. So at that time, his brother also joined the Army.

In the Army, Felix worked for the aviation unit. His assignment was in Hawaii; his brother's assignment was in Germany. Since Felix loved Germany and wanted to serve with his brother, he transferred assignments and spent the majority of his Army career based in Germany.

"I deployed from Germany to Iraq. When the Persian Gulf War kicked off, I was in Germany, so I went to Iraq with my aviation unit. I spent seven and a half months over there and then went back to Germany," Felix said. His goal was to get into Colorado's aviation program, but the Army had other plans. "I went to Ft. Drum where I spent another two and a half years and deployed twice with them. I went to Somalia and Haiti."

Ft. Drum was Felix's least favorite duty station in part because he was deployed to Somalia, the toughest deployment of his career. Felix was responsible for 16 people in his aviation unit, which was deployed to Somalia for what was supposed to be a humanitarian mission.

"It turned out we had to fight for our lives," Felix said.

Felix was the only member of his unit that had a permit to operate the 20-ton and 50-ton forklifts there. He was asked to help with grave administration, which was located right across the flight landing, by moving a freezer filled with dead United Nations soldiers and helping bury it three feet under the sand. Felix completed that task, but before he could return to his camp, the enemy opened fire.

“On the way back to the compound, I was in the middle of a firefight,” Felix said. He was driving the forklift, which tops out at 20 miles per hour, with bullets “whizzing around this little cage.” His men could see him approaching, but there was nothing they could do. His only thought was to keep his head down and survive.

“I had to suck up my fear, duck, and drive the thing. I made it into the compound just in time,” Felix said. He could hear the mortar round sailing overhead. He found shelter between two 10-foot-tall forklift tires and prayed the machine wouldn’t start rolling forward. The mortar round hit one of the aircrafts—filled with fuel and ammunition—and exploded. That was when Felix saw his life flash before him.

“After this one, that’s it, I’m going to get out,” Felix said. “That was by far my worst deployment.”

The next ten years of Felix’s career were spent in recruiting. After twenty honorable years—years with no regrets—he was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis and was medically retired. Although he would love to spend another ten years in the military, he is proud of all that he accomplished.

“If it was not for this disability, I would still be in uniform today,” Felix said. “I have 20 years of honorable service and I think I served this country well.” After hearing Felix’s stories—not just of war, but of recruiting as well—I know this to be true. He not only fought bravely for his country, but also impacted the lives of his recruits, many of whom still rely on him today.