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A Motto to Live By

“No, I never planned for it,” Lieutenant Garcia answered to my asking if he meant to stay in the Navy for nearly a quarter century. “Like I said, when I was enlisted, I enjoyed every minute of it. Even when I was in places not over-joyful, I tried to make the best of it.” The time was a little past 4:00 p.m. on April 2, 2019, the location was The Citadel, and I had just sat down to interview my TAC officer, Lieutenant Garcia. Prior to this interview I only knew a little bit about Orlando Garcia. My only impression of my TAC officer was that he was undoubtedly the most cheerful person in my battalion with his famous cheek-to-cheek grin. After this interview, I became aware of the steel in his character and how his optimism allowed him to accomplish a great amount during his 22 years and 11 months in the Navy.

Orlando Garcia was born in Puerto Rico in 1971. His grandfather served in the U.S Army, and, growing up, Orlando was in awe of his accomplishments. “He had a bunch of pictures of his time in the military and every time I saw them, I felt inspired to join and serve,” he told me. When he reached high school Orlando began to investigate, “When I was in high school, I was interested in the military, the Navy especially. So, I started talking to the



recruiter about the Navy's opportunities and what I could do. They mentioned aviation maintenance, and after giving me an overview, I decided that was where my interest lay." After graduating and turning 18, Orlando Garcia enlisted in the United States Navy on December 6, 1989.

The Navy allowed Orlando to pursue his interest and placed him as a jet engine mechanic on Cecil Field in Florida. As part of an F-18 squadron, his daily duties involved working 10-hour shifts, starting at 6:00 in the morning and ending at 4:00 in the afternoon. "We had to do all the maintenance on the aircraft. We had to make sure it was ready for flight, then, after returning from a flight, we had to verify it was ready again for the next mission," he said.

His first deployment was in operation Enduring Freedom, where he spent 110 days on his carrier without any sight of land. "We never jumped in [the ocean], but life was too busy for that anyway. We worked 12-, 14-, and even 16-hour shifts. I would lose track of the time and not even know what day it was until I looked at my watch." Despite the grueling workload, Orlando Garcia continued working on self-improvement, which allowed him to advance to positions of authority. "At one point I was a work-center supervisor. I was in charge of people and had to make sure they were accomplishing the mission."

Making the Best of Things

As an enlisted sailor, Orlando Garcia enjoyed his work immensely, particularly his duties that required him to troubleshoot the aircrafts. These duties allowed him to brush elbows with officers and pilots, who left a favorable impression. "I used to look at them; they looked sharp, they knew what they were doing and looked squared away. That motivated me just talking with them. It got me thinking, 'I can do that.' So that's how I started looking into it," he explained.



In order to qualify for Officer Candidate School, Orlando needed a degree and began taking course work in his meager spare time at nights and on weekends. “I completed my degree going to classes after working 10-hour shifts from the early morning,” he said. Career aspirations were not the only interests occupying his off-duty hours. While on leave home in Puerto Rico in the early 1990s, Orlando met his future wife, Jisela. “I met her in Puerto Rico [during] one of the times I went on leave back home,” he told me. “She knew my brother as a friend, so I met my wife through him. We kicked from there and been together ever since.” At this point in the interview his face lit up in his signature smile, his teeth flashing ear to ear. They married in February of 1994 and later had their first child, Jinsely, in Jacksonville, Florida.

After getting married and having his first daughter, Orlando was transferred to Sigonella, Italy, where he embraced the culture. “Well, I did not learn any Italian, but you know I’m from Puerto Rico, so I speak Spanish, which is very common. Me and my wife, we got along very well because it’s a very similar language to Spanish. The food was amazing, the culture was

amazing, the history was amazing.” In order to make the best of their stay, the Garcias traveled throughout Europe to Rome and even Germany. During their time in Italy, their little family added another member when Jisela gave birth to their second daughter, Jessica.



At this point, Orlando was approaching his 10th year in the navy, a period of transition for enlisted sailors. “If you talk to a lot of enlisted people, typically that’s their career hump where many decide to leave,” he explained. “Me and my wife talked about it, how my degree was almost done and what other opportunities I had in the Navy. I decided to stay in and keep making the best of my opportunities.”

After arriving at this conclusion and completing his degree, Orlando applied and was accepted into Officer Candidate School. He spent the next three and a half years completing the required training before he finally became a flight officer. While still in flight school, his wife gave birth to his third daughter, Samantha. Lt. Garcia acknowledged that he owes a lot to his

wife for all the work she did caring for their children: “She helped out a lot, those of you who know having a kid, everything that comes with caring for newborns, and I’m still in flight school.” After becoming a flight officer, Lt. Garcia was assigned to a P-3 Orion aircraft as its tactical officer. “When a plane’s assigned a mission, the one given the mission directly is the tactical officer,” he explained. “Then the tactical officer works with the navigator and everyone else to ensure the mission is accomplished.”



What Comes Next

Officer Garcia continued to serve as a flight officer for many years, gaining commendations and medals before being transferred to his final duty station as Navy ROTC instructor at The Citadel. “I did that almost four years. I was lucky to be stationed in Charleston,” he said. my wife and I both love the weather.” Finally, in September of 2012, Lt. Garcia retired from the Navy. Because neither Orlando nor Jisela had any desire to return to Puerto Rico, the

two decided to settle down in Charleston, South Carolina. Lt. Garcia was hired as a TAC officer at The Citadel. When I asked if he plans to stay a long time, he laughed then shrugged, “So far I enjoy what I do. I enjoy working with cadets: teaching, advising, coaching. It brings me joy to help others make the best of their opportunities. I hope to stay here as long as I can.”