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Feature Article

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### **A Dream Realized**

There are not many people who can honestly say they lived the life that they dreamed of as a kid, but fortunately Chris Polites is able to. A career officer in the U.S. Army, Polites retired with the rank of Lieutenant Colonel. His journey of leadership took him across the country and across the world. Some major places he lived and worked were Arizona, New York, and North Carolina when he was stateside, he also did tours in Panama, Kosovo, Afghanistan, and the Philippines. This wide variety of places has created a unique outlook on his life and experience as an Army officer. With those experiences, however, he also encountered unique difficulties. These experiences and difficulties have contributed to his leadership and his decision-making in later life. LTC Polites is a man who serves honorably and passionately in whatever situation he is, and his sharp mind and eloquent speech make it easy to understand why he has been so successful in his service.

From his time as a middle schooler in Lexington, Kentucky, Chris realized that he either wanted to join the U.S. Army or the U.S. Marine Corps because of his interest in various war movies he watched at the time. Like most kids interested in the Army, he made his mind up that West Point was the place he needed to go in order to accomplish his dreams. However, Chris did not have an enjoyable visit to the classic school: “I was paired up with a plebe that said he wasn’t going to come back, and it just wasn’t a very good visit. It was cold and rainy, so I came back from that trip completely disillusioned and not knowing where I wanted to go to college.”

Fortunately, one of his best friends, Jamie Hamilton, had a father who had gone to another military school, The Citadel. Upon hearing about the school, Christopher decided to give this school a shot and take a visit, and he was glad he did. From the very beginning he, “fell in love with the campus.” He decided that The Citadel is where he wanted to go. Due to his history of high academic performance, something instilled by his parents, Christopher received the Star of the West Scholarship, which gave him a full scholarship to the military college. So, in August of 1988, Christopher matriculated to The Citadel, the first step in achieving his dream of becoming an Army Officer.

While at school, Chris originally studied Political Science, but he later changed to a major that caught his interest more deeply, History. With that coursework, he found it possible to learn about a wide range of topics and regions with his studies. He could be reading about Antebellum South, the history of far eastern civilizations like ancient China, or the Cold War power of the Soviet Union. About his education he said, “Fortunately, I was able to get a good, well-rounded history in the background.” Along with the diverse course load, Chris became a voracious reader of all subjects, due in part to the encouragement he received from his Army ROTC instructors, and he began his path of being a life-long learner. These academic successes along with high performance at Army ROTC training allowed Chris to earn a selective branching as an Intelligence Officer. He commissioned as 2<sup>nd</sup> LT in the U.S. Army with a future in Army Intelligence in front of him.

Lieutenant Polites believes he was ready for active duty with the help of his four-year preparation at The Citadel. He was taught how to be an analyst at Fort Huachuca, Arizona, for his initial training. “They essentially teach you to be a staff officer first,” he explained. “The focus definitely was to fill intelligence officer positions on staff.” However, his initial

experiences were not those of a staff officer. Instead, he was fortunate enough to be assigned to Fort Bragg, North Carolina, in a platoon in the Charlie 313<sup>th</sup> for his first assignment. This was the direct support battalion for the famous 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division, and he was excited because he had been Airborne qualified as a cadet.

Being a platoon leader right out the gate helped him understand the power of using his NCOs and the importance of setting and living by the standards set in the unit. That was especially true for the 82<sup>nd</sup> since everyone in it was already so high performing. He described this experience as having a major impact on his future leadership: “The caliber of unit I was assigned to initially really set the tone for the rest of my career for what are my personal expectations and the expectations of the subordinates for the units that I go to.”



The time spent in his unit was a big step in his life, but it was not the only one. While serving as the XO of Charlie Company, he married his wife, Sabrina. His first child, Zoe, was born later. His first stages as a young officer were big in both professional and personal aspects. The responsibilities became more important, because he now had a family to take care of.

His time on Charlie helped him prepare for his next assignment with the 505<sup>th</sup> infantry unit, another elite unit within the Army. It once again stressed competence and leadership for the young lieutenant, and he was ready for the challenge. On the second day of being in his new unit, he was deployed to Panama. It was a crowd-control effort for the various migrants and refugees from Cuba that were taking camp in Panama: “We had about 22 tents set up, and that is where we lived for two months while we were policing the camps. Escorting migrants to communication centers. They were political refugees from Castro in Cuba,” he told me. The work Captain Polites did in Panama foreshadowed his future career path. Operations like population and resource control are both Civil Affairs functions, the branch he would move to after intelligence.

He then served as the squadron S2 for the 17<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Regiment for the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne, a position he held for two years. His experience was unique because he served as a Captain for a good amount of time before officially completing the Army Captain’s career course; he was being trained to do something he already had done before. With his assignment to the 10<sup>th</sup> Mountain Division, he was then deployed to Kosovo for the mission. Kosovo was considered much more operational deployment even though there was a great combat threat on the ground. He discussed how the joint work with a Russian Airborne unit presented challenges to the mission. “Their behavior presented some challenges for the task force,” he concluded. The communications and missions were different and made it difficult to work together. While he

was in Kosovo, there was the tragedy of 9/11 stateside. The work in Kosovo immediately became less exciting because everyone wanted to help and join the forces involved with Afghanistan.

After that period, he served as an instructor for rising captains in Intelligence at Camp Wauchula. During his time there, he taught normal intelligence officers, branch details officers, and Jordanian officers. It was enjoyable work, but he wanted to be in the action in Iraq. The Polites family took a trip to Disney Land during the initial invasion of Iraq, and he remembers trying to forget about his desire to join in the action: “I was chomping at the bits to get back. She [his wife, Sabrina] had to say, ‘Chris they are going to get their pound of skin soon enough. You’re mine [now], so enjoy your time with your family.’” Afterwards, the family moved to Fort Bragg so that he could focus his efforts into branching into Civil Affairs before his promotion to Major. He now credits becoming a Civil Affairs officer as one of the best decisions of his life.

In 2004 he began his year-long qualification training for Civil Affairs in regional, cultural expertise along with four to six months of language training. There was only one active duty Civil Affairs battalion the 96th, and he was assigned to Charlie Company 96th due



to his language knowledge of Arabic. They were working on the move and “building the plane while flying it.”

He did his first tour in Iraq in 2005. Polites really enjoyed the level of autonomy that they had during deployment. In addition to military engagement, the missions focused on knowing the civil component and finding weaknesses to either fix or exploit depending on the relationship with the local population. These missions were not quite as clear and left decisions in a constant grey area, which made the work very challenging; however, Polites enjoyed the freedom and challenges of the grey area. There were certain challenges, like finding the right enemies hidden within populations, that were incredibly difficult. It was also difficult to be separated from his family for long stretches with little to no contact. Determined to see his kids grow up, LTC Polites retired after 21 years.



When thinking about what he would do after his time in the military, LTC Polites reflected on the lack of definite results he had in deployments to Iraq and the Philippines. For him, there was a tangible result missing at the end of the day for his Special Operation tasks in these environments. “There was something missing. I didn’t have a tangible result at the end of the day,” he told me. He kept thinking about “what we were there to do and why we were there,” musing that “those Al Qaeda-linked folks...now they have pledged loyalty to ISIS.”

In retirement, LTC Polites wanted a job that produced a satisfying result at the end of every day. “When I retired, I wanted to do something with a tangible, finished product at the end of the day,” he said. He found himself getting involved with blacksmithing and found quite the joy in it. Being a Kentucky kid with a great love for horses, he then went to farrier school, eventually starting a fully functional farrier practice in which he makes horseshoes to this day. This business allowed for him to spend more time with his family, something he missed during his time on active duty.

LTC Polites enjoyed farriering very much, but he did say he would be willing to do it part-time if there ever were a job opening at The Citadel. Once his alma mater posted an opening, LTC Polites applied and earned the job as Sierra Company TAC Officer, a job where he can share his wisdom from a 21-year career and teach, advise, and coach cadets—another role in which he can see concrete results each day. Once a cadet being mentored by leaders at The Citadel, he now finds himself being the leader in charge of mentoring. Highly regarded and respected by the Corps, LTC Polites now inspires the next generation of cadets.