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A Life of Service in the Air: An Interview with David Culler

Until the day of our interview, my only interaction with David Culler had been through email. He had expressed his interest in taking part in The Citadel's Veterans Oral History Project and explained that he would only be in Charleston for a couple days. David, now retired from the Army, teaches soldiers how to fly the AH-64 Apache Helicopter in Fort Rucker, Alabama. He'll soon be receiving his M.B.A from The Citadel, and, on the day of our interview, he had just picked up his daughter from the Charleston Airport and was showing her around the campus. She wouldn't be able to make it to graduation in May, so this was her only chance to see the place.

With all of this in mind, I wasn't sure what to expect when finally meeting David. The short biography that he had sent me of his 25 years in the Army was impressive, and his obvious desire to share his experiences left me feeling intimidated. He was even taking time out of his day with his daughter to speak with me. I knew that I needed to put my best foot forward, and I was worried that I wouldn't.

These fears melted away the moment I shook David's hand, however. In this moment, it became clear that David was a polite, kind, and humble man. He had a warmth about him, and I could tell that he was just as grateful for the opportunity to share his story as I was for the opportunity to listen to it. In fact, if I could use one word to describe David and his entire

outlook on his military service, it would be just that: grateful. He is grateful to have had the opportunity to serve his country, and he is grateful to have served with such amazing people throughout his career. His life is truly a life of service, but throughout this interview, David comes back time and time again to call attention to the people who served alongside him. It wasn't—and still isn't—ever about him.

“As a favor to my Father...”

David Culler was born in Mount Airy, North Carolina, the birthplace of Andy Griffith, in 1968. When David was a child, his father started a Boy Scout troop in the town, and David, now an Eagle Scout, mentions this influence first before admitting that school wasn't his strong suit. “In high school, my grades were...ok,” he says to me with a chuckle, “I had a problem debating the teachers.”

As graduation approached, David thought of joining the Marine Corps, but his father had been in the Army, his uncle had been in the Army, and his grandfather had been in the Army. His maternal grandfather had been in the Navy, but that was beside the point. He figured that he should at least give the Army a try. “So as a favor to my father, I went to speak with a family friend who happened to be an Army Reserve recruiter,” he tells me. This favor ended with the recruiter, Sgt. White, telling David that he would become a part of the 11th Special Forces Group as a combat medic. David visited the group before his training commenced, and explains to me, “They weren't unlike a Boy Scout Troop—just heavily armed.”

From the recruiter's desk in Winston-Salem, David went on to basic training and jump school before getting his individual training as a medic. Having already gone through jump

school, the training to be a medic seemed rather slow for David, but he got through it anyway and graduated in 1987. After the completion of this training, David learned that the 11th Special Forces group had been disbanded. He had to go somewhere else.

“I made a phone call”

The Army, having broken their promise, offered David a position in a reserve unit with ambulances, but that wasn't enough. He'd been to jump school after all, and he figured that he should put the training to good use. So David decided to take matters into his own hands and call the inter-service recruiter for the 82nd Airborne. He admits that he stepped on a few toes by doing so, but he got what he wanted, and he spent the majority of his career with the 82nd as a result.

When attempting to explain to me why he seemed to always take initiative at crucial points in his career to get what he wanted, David tells me, “I think I got that from my father... his father passed away young, so my father at the age of 15 was the oldest male in the house and had to handle everything.” David describes his father as the type of man who would take things apart and put them back together again. “He was never afraid to go one step more” he says.

After a couple of years as a medic in the 82nd, David took the initiative again. One day, after being put on lunch watch by his 1st Sergeant (David forgot his beret at formation and that was his punishment) he met a young E-5 who asked for some obscure medical papers. When David asked the E-5 what he needed the papers for, the young man told him, “I'm going to Warrant Officer Flight School.” David gives me a facial expression of shock at this point of the interview as he recounts the story. It had never occurred to him that flight school was even an option.

Flight School

David, with his interest piqued, went on to take the test needed to be eligible for selection to flight school. He took a physical, and he submitted the packet to the Army before the Christmas of '89. He had a letter of acceptance sent to him by the first week of January, and he had his orders by the second week. He humbly tells me, "I had scored in the 97th percentile or something like that." I assumed that this was the reason for such a quick turn of events. Before he even knew what was going on, David was being escorted through Fort Bragg and was on his way to Warrant Officer Flight School.

After taking the first test of flight school, David was selected to fly the AH-1 Cobra, but before getting to fly the Cobra, however, like the rest of his classmates, David learned the basics on the UH-1 Huey for the school's first phase. It was a "common core" curriculum. They learned how to hover, perform basic maneuvers, read instruments, and read a map while flying.

Operation Desert Shield/Storm

David went back with the 82nd after his year and a half at flight school, but this time, he walked into Fort Bragg as a Cobra pilot. Not long after he made it back to the 82nd, the group deployed to Fort Chaffee, Arkansas, and they stayed in Fort Chaffee for ten days before hearing the news that Saddam Hussein had invaded Kuwait. It was the August of 1990, and the First Gulf War had begun.

What followed were training exercises meant to prepare the 82nd for the September deployment to Saudi Arabia. David recounts a cross-country flight in the helicopters during this

period and a night spent in a Piggly Wiggly parking lot after running low on fuel over Cleveland, Georgia: “We had four cobras and a Black Hawk in the parking lot that night, I think. Very nice people!”

Once David finally made it to Saudi Arabia at the beginning of September, the Saudi Air Force housed the 82nd in a “paint shed.” The 82nd feared that the conflict would move south and did all that they could do—they patiently waited as more soldiers came into the country from the U.S. In all, David spent 9 months with the 82nd in Saudi Arabia through both Desert Shield and Desert Storm.

It’s during this portion of the interview when David starts describing the culture of the aircrews that he worked with throughout his career. He points out their humor and their attitude in the face of danger. There’s an obvious twinkle in his eye when he remembers the men who served alongside him, and this twinkle comes back whenever another name comes to his mind.

Korea

Once David got back to the U.S. from Saudi Arabia, he spent some time at the National Training Center for Desert Training. This seemed rather ironic at the time, since he had just come back from Desert Shield and Desert Storm, but he tells me a few fun stories about his training in the desert and a bit of the trouble he got into.

David around 1990 with his AH-1 Cobra



Following this training, David received orders to go to the test pilot course for the AH-1 before deploying to South Korea. He tells me about his time at the test pilot course, where he learned all of the intricacies of the AH-1 Cobra. He learned every single part of the aircraft, where the parts come from, and how to fix just about any problem that the helicopter might have. He did what his father might have done if he had ever been an Army pilot. He gained an expertise about the aircraft that many pilots never have the opportunity to garner, and he confesses to me, "I'm probably the last one in the Army."

Once in Korea, David learned firsthand about the complexities that exist within the relationship between North Korea and South Korea. He spent time near the DMZ and spoke with many Korean citizens about the conflict. It was a very informative time for David and one that has become even more relevant for him in recent years.

Germany to Albania, the "worst deployment of my life" (Task Force Hawk)

After his year in Korea, David wanted to get back to his unit at Fort Bragg. He ended up learning how to fly the AH-64 Apache instead and found himself in the 3rd Battalion of the 229th Army Aviation Regiment. He informs me that the 3rd Battalion is known as the "Hells Angels" and that whenever someone would give compare them to the biker gang, he'd reply with, "They're our cousins." David stayed with the 229th for two years, went through the test pilot course for the Apache, but he had no combat deployments.

In 1997, David received a permanent change of station from the 229th to the 6th US Cavalry Regiment in Germany. "I was there as a test pilot," he tells me. He would go along on missions and fly with other members of the 6th to make sure nothing went wrong.

David in Albania 1999

It's there in Germany that David received notice that he'd be a part of Task Force Hawk, a military unit deployed to Albania to provide support for NATO's forces against the Yugoslavian forces who were causing unrest in Kosovo. "It was the worst deployment of my life," David tells me, "Horrible. I think it was around the March of '99." They were told to expect 75% casualties and were based out of Albania's capital, Tirana. The Apache groups conducted night missions and flew through the mountains around the Kosovo border with the intent of preventing the slaughter between the ethnic Serbs and

Albanians. "It's a cultural conflict that goes back to the beginning of time," he tells me, "We were there for four months. It seemed like forever."

Fort Rucker, Egypt, and then Afghanistan

After Albania, David went back to Germany to finish off his tour, and once he got back to the U.S. in 2000, the Army stationed him in Fort Rucker, Alabama. He taught other pilots how to fly the Apache during this time, much like he does today, and he took more supplemental courses to sharpen his expertise. "There were always tests," he tells me.

In 2004, after having a chance encounter with some Egyptians at Fort Rucker, David found himself being sent to Egypt as a flight instructor for the Egyptian Air Force. A tour that was supposed to last a year turned into three.



Afghanistan in 2010

Back to the 82nd and then to Afghanistan

David had tried to go to Iraq from Egypt, but diplomatic issues made it impossible. When he landed in the States and the Army asked David to go back to Fort Rucker as a flight instructor, David insisted that he become an instructor at Fort Bragg. He wanted to deploy to Afghanistan, and he knew that would happen if he was with the 82nd. “I had friends that were on their fifth tour,” David tells me, “I just felt like I needed to carry my weight a little more before retirement.”

David deployed to Afghanistan in 2009 during the surge, and at this point in the interview, instead of telling me about the specifics of the deployment, David chooses to

remember his fallen brothers. I can see him fighting back the tears in his eyes as he recounts the names of his friends who died in Afghanistan.

What David doesn't talk about in this portion of the interview, most definitely because of the emotion involved, was his own meritorious actions in February of 2010. He was awarded the Army Air Medal for his bravery, and the narrative alongside the award speaks for itself. I have included it alongside this feature article on The Citadel's website.



The Certificate that came with David's Air Medal

Retirement at Fort Rucker

David opted to retire after his stint in Afghanistan. He worked as a defense contractor for a couple of years, dealing with Apache training and rose through the ranks quickly. In 2013, after the Federal contracts with the company were shelved, David moved on to fly helicopters for a hospital in Jacksonville, Florida, but when the regional manager asked him to move to Pennsylvania, David decided to head back home to Fort Rucker. He lives there to today, as an Apache flight instructor.



David and his Apache

I will remember David's story for the rest of my life. The years that he devoted to serving this great country were filled with both happiness and pain, and his hard work and determination during this time were truly motivating to hear about. David still serves. Even out of the Army, his everyday life is filled with the service of others. He provides an example of humility and service that is refreshing and profound. It wasn't—and isn't—about him.