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Soldier to Mentor: The Military Career of LTC Wright



Retired Army LTC Thomas Wright was born February 23, 1968, in Orangeburg, South Carolina. In his youth, he did not know what he wanted to do with his life after graduating from high school. Then, one day he decided to enroll at Benedict College in Columbia, South Carolina, and there, he was introduced to Army ROTC. With no money for college, Colonel

Wright decided to join the Army, jumpstarting his military career. At the end of his freshman year, Colonel Wright joined the National Guard, which gave discipline, money, and the GI Bill. Colonel Wright graduated from college in 1990 and immediately went to Infantry Officer Basic Course, the Bradley Commander's Course, and later went to Ranger School.

Colonel Wright's unit was a mechanized infantry unit that called themselves "The Rabid Dogs." Colonel Wright described his unit as the one that played hard and trained hard—all while being the best unit in the battalion. The leaders got along well and were in sync, maintaining high morale preventing a toxic command environment. As a young 2nd Lieutenant in the Army, he learned how to be a leader, and he humbled himself to learn from his NCOs, commander, and senior leadership. On deployment, Colonel Wright had been to Southwest Asia, Thailand, Germany, and various places in the United States. When he was deployed, his family kept in touch by writing letters and calling on the phone. It was great when the 1st Sergeant would come bringing mail, but receiving phone calls was at times troublesome. "It was pretty rough back in the day because everybody did not have a phone," he explained. "There were phone banks with long lines of people waiting to contact their loved ones."



In a few of Colonel Wright's wartime deployments, there was some hostility towards the U.S. soldiers. "Of course that hostility was with the enemy," he said. "I've been to Kuwait. A beautiful country with beautiful people. Bahrain, Dubai, and India, all of these countries welcomed me there. In my time spent in each country, I didn't feel any hostility with the host country. Although there were a few knuckleheads that tried to cause trouble, it was a pretty peaceful environment."

One of Colonel Wright's most difficult positions was his time as a Casualty Notifications Officer. "That was absolutely one of the worst duties I ever had to do, and I still think about this day," he said. "Initially it didn't bother me because I was an Airborne Ranger and could handle anything." He was given the training and was put to the test the next morning. It did not occur to Colonel Wright what he was about to do before he and the chaplain pulled up in front of the house. He was about to tell family members that their loved one was not going to come home anymore.

To survive through the tough times in the military, Colonel Wright relied on his battle buddies. When Colonel Wright became an officer in IOBC, he met a battle buddy named Cliff Paterson. Colonel Wright and Paterson immediately became fast friends as they shared the same experiences in their lives. They worked together, exercised together, and were able to confide in one another. September 11, 2001, was like a normal day for them, he explained. Colonel Wright and Paterson carried on their usual conversations by email until Paterson notified Colonel Wright of the situation in New York. "I turn on the TV and I see the building shaking and stuff falling all over the place. It was just a mess." On that day, Colonel Wright had his phone with him and he tried to get in contact with Paterson. There was no answer. Paterson's wife called Colonel Wright to check on her husband's whereabouts; they both became increasingly concerned as

days went by with no word from Paterson. It took about a week for a thorough search during which Paterson's body was identified. "That was the second most memorable moment in my career: losing a very close friend of mine."

After retiring from the military, Colonel Wright became a JROTC instructor at Lee Central High School. He felt that he had something to offer a small-town district comprised primarily of minorities. He wanted to teach kids to show them that they can make something of themselves just as he did. In 20 years, Colonel Wright retired as a Lieutenant Colonel, a significant accomplishment he feels his mentees can achieve also. This job gave Colonel Wright the opportunity to see individuals grow from shy people into adults exuding confidence. I'm grateful for being one LTC Wright's mentees—he is a model soldier and leader.

Colonel Wright had some encouraging words for me once the interview was completed, words I took to heart. Being courageous and accepting the ideals and values of others are qualities that he believes are necessary for principled leadership; he has fostered these characteristics in me. Despite the fact that he came to my school at the end of my senior year, I believe that I have learned a lot from Colonel Wright. It was great to see Colonel Wright again, and it was an honor to learn more about his military career.