



Written and
Photographed by
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The Prior
Enlisted Cadet
Assembly

from Airman **TO** **OFFICER**

C1C Jason Gabrick is not your typical cadet. He, along with 160 other cadets in the Wing, spent time in the enlisted corps before coming to the Academy. During his time in the Air Force he traveled the world, served in operation Iraqi Freedom and experienced things that most cadets entering the Academy straight out of high school could only dream of. In his four years at USAFA, Gabrick found himself undertaking a pioneering role in the history of prior enlisted cadets. Though many have come before him, not a single statue, plaque, painting or other physical piece of evidence has existed at the Academy to commemorate the rich lineage of prior enlisted cadets. Until now, that is.

Recently, on the balcony overlooking the ballroom in Arnold Hall, Gabrick stands with fellow prior enlisted C1C Ricky Casburn in front of a glimmer-

ing wall of polished plaques commemorating the names and class years of every prior enlisted cadet to graduate from the Academy. This heritage project is one of the many achievements of the Prior Enlisted Cadet Assembly (PECA), a club designed to strengthen the bonds between the enlisted core and the Academy's future officers.

Gabrick explains that PECA has a three-part mission: informing airmen of the opportunities which lead to the Academy and a commission, improving the image of the enlisted corps to the Cadet Wing and providing real world Air Force experience at the Academy. "Right now," Gabrick says, "there are about 160 prior enlisted cadets in the Wing, and we make up about 3.7% of the cadet population. We promote knowledge to current airmen about the opportunities awaiting them here at the Air Force Academy. Every year there are 85 active duty slots and 85 Guard and Reserve slots for airmen to come to USAFA. They don't need to go



C13Cs Ricky Casburn (left) and Jason Gabrick at the Arnold Hall memorial wall for prior enlisted cadets.



Prior enlisted cadets unveil the memorial wall at the dedication ceremony.

through congressional nominations like other civilian applicants; they can instead be nominated by their commanders.”

Casburn chimes in with an example from one of their recent recruiting trips. “Last year we made a trip down to Lackland AFB where we were able to talk to people in basic training and inform them early on about the opportunities for the enlisted here at the Academy. There are a lot of airmen out there who are eligible yet may not believe they have what it takes to come here. Airmen need to know that this is a realistic opportunity.”

Gabrick expresses his frustration in knowing that the Academy’s slot allocations for airmen and reserve are never fully filled. “We only bring in about 50 prior enlisted per year,” he says. “Out of 170 slots, when we only fill 50, in my view it’s sort of a failure to get our numbers up and bring in airmen who are fully capable of attending the Academy.”

While the current numbers may be low, Gabrick hopes to play a role in improving them for the future. In addition to recruiting for the Academy, PECA cadets also serve internal duties within the Cadet Wing. Gabrick explains, “We are charged with bettering the image of the enlisted corps in the Cadet Wing through prior enlisted cadets. A lot of cadets here don’t get much exposure to the enlisted corps; they don’t deal with airmen and staff sergeants, so having

those people as peers is a good step for us. Ricky flew on combat missions and I’ve deployed to Iraq. Our experience makes for a good impression on an 18-year-old cadet coming to the Academy right out of high school.”

The third objective of PECA’s mission statement is to better the Cadet Wing through mentorship and experience. Having served in the Air Force before coming to the Academy, prior enlisted cadets are the perfect role models for those who have never seen combat, deployed to a foreign country or even been inside a C-17 cargo hold. While the Academy remains unmatched in providing academic experiences in the laboratories and classrooms, nothing at USAFA can fully prepare a cadet for what he or she will face when the engines are screaming through the wake of enemy fire in the line of duty.

Both Gabrick and Casburn had a well-rounded time in the service before coming to the Academy. Gabrick recalls a brief history of his time in the Air Force fresh out of high school in 2003. “As soon as I finished basic training I went to technical school for logistics. I arrived at my first duty station at Travis Air Force Base in California in 2004. In less than a year I was deployed to Iraq in support of operation Iraqi Freedom. I was there during the elections, so I had the pleasure and privilege of delivering the first elec-

toral ballots to the voting booths. We did some humanitarian aid missions bringing food and supplies to villages. Here I am an 18-year-old kid in Iraq. That really changes your paradigm. Coming back home, I had an officer who really motivated me to look into the application process to the Air Force Academy.”

Casburn also joined up in 2003, taking a much different course of action. “I joined the Air Force as a loadmaster, so I went through tech school in Texas and then on to survival school.” Casburn was later selected to go on to special operations command and was stationed in Okinawa where he flew on air crews for two years. “I was fortunate enough that my commander, Lt. Col. Bradley Hammer, ’88, was a prior preppie, and he really motivated me to apply to the Academy. I ended up at the Prep School in 2006 with Cadet Gabrick.”

What most people may take for granted is that prior enlisted cadets end up going through basic training three times. The first of course is boot camp. After their service as airmen, it’s on to the Prep School basic training, and finally Basic Cadet Training at the Academy. Both Casburn and Gabrick reflect on their time at the Academy’s BCT and having to deal with being overseen by a younger and less experienced cadet cadre.

“Boot camp at Lackland Air Force Base was certainly eye opening,” Cas-



CIC Jason Gabrick works on the prior enlisted memorial plaque in the Academy wood shop.



CIC Jason Gabrick gives his speech at the opening ceremonies for the prior enlisted heritage wall.

burn begins. “It’s your first experience into a new environment when you just leave home and you’re 18 years old. It was pretty frightening having master sergeants getting in your face all day long for six and a half weeks straight. The Prep School was a lot different because people are generally in a lot better shape here in Colorado. They know they can push you. By the time we got up to the Academy, we knew what to expect. I was older than my entire training staff, so it was strange having guys who were younger than me yelling at me all day long. It was certainly more humbling than I expected because I saw a lot of competency in those guys who were doing the training.”

Gabrick echoes his friend’s sentiments, recalling that for Prep School basic and BCT alike, when all the cadre above you are younger than you (and in military terms less experienced) it doesn’t help with your pride. “It’s really a force to be humbled by. We were taking humble pie every day as freshmen. If you don’t eat the pie, your peers will look at you with disdain, and that doesn’t help you or anyone else. As prior enlisted, we come to the Academy with a positive disposition and wanting to teach our classmates about the Air Force, but there’s a fine line between teaching and telling. For me, I came away with a few scars from some lines I crossed as a freshman, but it was a great lesson in humility and one of the most important things I learned at the Academy.”

In their four years at USAFA, the two cadets have been hard at work promoting the mission of PECA. Not all of it has been easy, especially considering the challenges they have faced as prior enlisted. “Going through the Academy is a grueling day by day grind,” Gabrick says. “I know from personal experience that prior enlisted cadets sometimes carry the stigma of not having the academic foundation that most cadets have. It had been seven years since I’d last taken a math class when I entered the Prep School. So it’s nice to have motivation and inspiration from others.”

Gabrick and Casburn explain that PECA has recently been restructured to have a budget, an organizational account, yearly dues and regular TDYs in which cadets go out to recruit airmen. “We have to catch them while they’re young,” Casburn says, “before they’re married or have children.”

Gabrick explains, “We also developed a website for the Prior Enlisted Assembly that provides step-by-step instructions for airmen who want to apply to the Academy. It covers all the regulations and has a list of phone numbers to call.”

Perhaps the greatest undertaking that PECA has become involved with is their new heritage project. Feeling a strong personal connection to the project, Gabrick took the initiative to see it through to the end, rather than hand it off to the upcoming class. “The big push

for the plaque project,” he recounts, “was a looming absence of any sort of heritage recognizing the enlisted corps here at the Academy. It’s not a time to boast, but there’s something to be said for the prior enlisted who were veterans from Vietnam, the Gulf War, Iraq and Afghanistan. We have Purple Heart recipients among our prior enlisted cadets.”

When all of the paperwork for a memorial project was finally approved, Gabrick ran into yet another hurdle when he arrived at the Training Devices machine shop to submit his construction documents. “The guys in the shop kind of had a good laugh when I showed up with this project. When I asked, ‘What’s so funny?’ they replied: ‘We can do this, but it won’t be finished until you’re a First Lieutenant.’”

As it turned out, the staff at the base shop was completely overwhelmed and under-manned. An undertaking as large as the PECA heritage project would take years to complete. Refusing to be dissuaded, Gabrick reveals his initial impressions. “My first thought was that I have 160 prior enlisted cadets at my disposal who would love to give time and effort to this project.” Gabrick asked the staff at Training Devices if they would be willing to teach enough basic shop skills to allow the cadets themselves to complete the heritage plaques. “They were more than willing to help in that respect,” Gabrick beams. “I went down to the shop every



Chief Master Sergeant John T. "Todd" Salzman addresses the crowd during the dedication ceremony.

day for three months, putting in two hours a day to cut wood, lacquer, stain and sand. As time progressed, more of the prior enlisted came on board to do the labor and put the plaques together."

Today, the heritage project is complete, its rows of polished metal gleaming in the sunlight that streams in through the north windows of Arnold Hall.

The wooden plaques are lacquered and hand-sanded, spanning almost the entire balcony which overlooks the ballroom below. The names of every prior enlisted cadet stand proudly before the world, earned by cadets and built by cadets.

"For the entire time I was here," Gabrick recalls, "there wasn't a single display on any wall that talks about prior enlisted cadets. For me, this heritage project became personal. Now, when I'm having a rough day I can look at this wall and say, "They did it and so can I."

Casburn couldn't agree more. "We're just trying to get the word out that this club exists and that airmen who are interested can contact us for guidance. Arnold Hall is a very public place, and having our heritage on the wall there is a great way to get the word out. If I didn't have a commander who encouraged me to apply, I never would have thought that I was the caliber of person who could come to the Academy."

At the time of this publication, both Gabrick and Casburn are now proud second lieutenants. They first took their

places in the Long Blue Line as airmen and have now come full circle as officers. Today, they continue their pursuit of brave young men and women among the enlisted corps who show the talent, the courage and the ambition to join the ranks of the elite at the United States Air Force Academy. ✓

To learn more about the Prior Enlisted Cadet Assembly and their mission, please visit www.usafapeca.com.

memories from Prior Enlisted Graduates

“ Being able to apply the attention to detail, leadership and other skills learned from my enlisted days made the Academy experience easier for me and as an officer has allowed my men and women to trust me more. Often it was because they knew I had their backs, even if risks were taken or a mistake was made. Empower your enlisted and civilians, guide them, and even allow room for mistakes; but most important—respect each person, praise their dedication and congratulate jobs well done. There is more than one way to achieve success, so do not stifle an airman's ingenuity. ”

Maj. Jason "Cueball" Simmons, '00
USAF Chief, Information/
Mission Assurance
HQ Air Force Special
Operations Command

“ When I retired in 2009, I was very cognizant and appreciative of the opportunity to attend the Academy as a prior enlisted cadet. At first I was erroneously denied admission due to age restrictions, but perseverance rewarded me with an admission letter to the Prep School that I happened to receive on my birthday in June of 1986. I was on cloud nine as I walked back to my dormitory from the post office at RAF Chicksands. What a life-changing moment! But the euphoria was soon tempered by the reality of the 5-year challenge before me. I met that challenge through perseverance and the support of family and classmates. My 14 months of enlisted experience enabled me with the confidence and discipline I needed to meet the challenge. From BMT at Lackland, to four months of highly technical training at Cory Station, Florida, to a first assignment overseas, those scant 14 months held a lifetime of growth. I'm proud to be a prior enlisted Academy graduate. I thank everyone responsible for honoring the "road less traveled" by prior enlisted cadets. ”

–Todd May, '91