



Elementarily speaking, military members are heroes

Commentary by 2nd Lt. Zach Anderson
4th Air Force/PA

7/6/2010 - **MARCH AIR RESERVE BASE, CALIF.** -- As a lowly 2nd lieutenant, I don't receive many speaking invitations.

And by not many, I mean none.

The fact is, most folks would rather hear the introspective thoughts of a colonel, a general or a senior non-commissioned officer as opposed to the incoherent ramblings of a butter bar. I completely understand that sentiment. Heck, I really wouldn't want to listen to myself, either.

However, last week when I was presented with an invitation to speak about my career in the Air Force Reserve, I jumped at the chance. At last, I finally had my opportunity to be just like the senior officers and enlisted members I admired. This was my chance to stand before an audience and captivate them with my eloquence as I gave a powerful, articulate speech about the Air Force, my job and specifically, what I do.

This is what all those practice briefings at Officer Training School were about! This is what I was trained for! This is what public affairs officers do! Needless to say, I was pumped.

My venue? Liberty Elementary School's 2010 Career Day.

My audience? A classroom full of first through sixth graders.

Okay, so it wasn't exactly addressing the Joint Chiefs of Staff, but I was still stoked. Finally, someone wanted to hear what the L.T. had to say!

I was determined to give a first-rate presentation. I spent hours working on a slideshow presentation explaining the different types of jobs in the Air Force. I prepared diagrams that showed how the military can help pay for college. I researched career fields and made notes about the points about my specific job I wanted to cover. By the time Career Day rolled around, I was ready for anything.

Well ... anything except for questions conjured up in the inquiring minds of seven-year olds.

My preparations paid off and the presentation went without a hitch. The students were quiet and extremely respectful as I confidently delivered what I considered to be a top-notch informative lecture. After I finished, I opened the floor for questions.

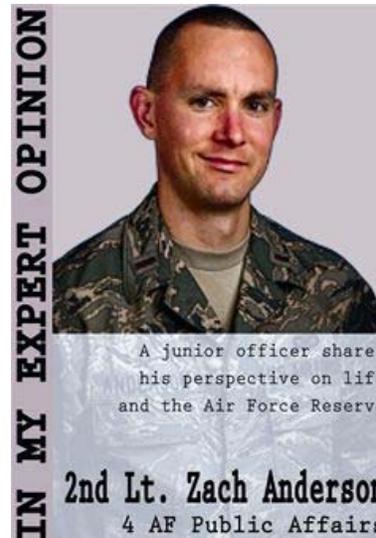
In my brief military career, I have sat stone-faced and unflinching before review boards. I have received advanced training on how to respond to media queries and surprise questions on any scenario imaginable. I have dealt with hard-hitting journalists and answered controversial questions without batting an eye. I have conducted more interviews than I can count.

Those experiences were nothing compared to the grilling I received at the hands of a classroom of elementary school students.

A few excerpts:

Student: "Didn't you drop a nuclear bomb in World War II?"

Me: "Well ... Uhhhh not me specifically, no ..."



[Social Revolution](#)

Student: "How many nuclear bombs are at your base?"

Me: "Oh, geez um, I can neither confirm nor deny ..."

Student: "What can you tell me about Area 51?"

Me: "Only what I've seen on 'The X-Files' ..."

Student: "What's the most fun thing you've ever done flying?"

Me: "Uhhh ... well, I once got a free upgrade to first class ..."

Student: "Does your boss yell at you every morning to get you out of bed?"

Me: "If by 'boss' you mean 'wife,' only if she's in a bad mood ..."

And so it went, questions from the kids about anything and everything concerning war, aircraft or the military they had ever heard or seen on video games, on TV or in a movie. I started to become discouraged. I mean, yeah, they were kids, but weren't they interested in what I do? Didn't they grasp the importance of my job in the military? Don't they understand that it's not all war, we aren't all fighter pilots and that we all have different jobs and different ways of contributing to the overall mission?

Then, the coolest thing happened.

As the class period came to a close and the students prepared to file out of the room, each made an effort to come by, shake my hand, give me a high-five or bump knuckles. They smiled at me, looking at me like I was the greatest thing ever. For a brief second, I wondered what I had done or said that was so great to get this type of response.

And that's when it hit me.

It's not about me, or what I said to the students. It's not about my job, or about any of our individual jobs. It's about the service, the sacrifice and the history that our jobs in the military represent.

See, the kids weren't impressed with me, my job in the Air Force Reserve, or my own personal experiences. What they were impressed with, what they did understand, is the uniform I was wearing, or, more specifically, what that uniform stood for. They may not understand the intricacies of the different career fields in the military or how the real Air Force isn't quite like a movie.

But they do understand the significance of what thousands of men and women in uniform do each day. They understand that those who serve provide an incredible service to our country; they protect it, they keep it safe and they keep it free. They understand that the military, and the history behind it, deserves respect and gratitude.

Shaking my hand was their way of saying thank you ... not to me, but to all service members. And, it was a genuine reflection of the appreciation and admiration the citizens of this nation have for all men and women in uniform.

I'm sure I'll have other speaking opportunities throughout my career. No doubt I'll someday stand before an audience that will be impressed with statistics and facts ... an audience that will be interested in my fancy, informative slides. But I will never forget my first public speaking engagement to a small group of children, nor will I forget their genuine, innocent display of gratitude they displayed for all men and women who have served, no matter what their job.