My Journey to Cybersecurity: A Path of Exploration and Service

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Abstract

My name is John Peck. This narrative essay recounts the academic, work, and internship experiences, to pursue a career in cybersecurity. The essay explores my childhood fascination with computers, my transition to Norfolk, Virginia for my studies at Old Dominion University, and my discovery of Navy ROTC and the role of a Cryptologic Warfare Officer. The narrative delves into the Navy ROTC internship at RTC Great Lakes, where the author served as a Midshipman Instructor, mentoring and guiding Midshipman Candidates in the NROTC program. The essay highlights the application of cybersecurity skills in delivering an Operational Security (OPSEC) briefing and reflects on the relevance of the ODU Cybersecurity curriculum to the internship experience. The internship has left a profound impact on my college journey and future career plans, solidifying my commitment to a career dedicated to protecting national security interests. Through this narrative, I share my personal journey of exploration and service in the cybersecurity realm.

Keywords: Cybersecurity, Narrative, Navy ROTC, Cryptologic Warfare Officer, Internship, Old Dominion University, OPSEC, National Security.

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Introduction

In the ever-evolving landscape of technology, I found myself drawn to the world of cybersecurity - a realm that offered challenges and opportunities to protect and defend digital assets. As I reflect on my academic, work, and internship experiences, I realize how each milestone has shaped my career path and led me to pursue a major in Cybersecurity. This narrative essay takes you through my journey, from my childhood fascination with computers to my current pursuit of a career as a Cryptologic Warfare Officer, blending my passion for technology with my dedication to serving my country.

Discovering My Interest in Cybersecurity

My fascination with computers and technology began during my childhood in Dayton, Ohio. I vividly remember the excitement of receiving my first computer, and from that moment, I was hooked. I spent countless hours exploring the digital realm, eager to understand the inner workings of electronic devices. I would always just open my computer, and look at the countless small parts thinking to myself this is so cool. As I progressed through high school, my curiosity deepened, and I stumbled upon an introductory course on cybersecurity. The concept of safeguarding digital information and networks from cyber threats piqued my interest, leading me to pursue further studies in this field. This class was a very base level class where I learned computer components, and how to do very low level programming with scratch.

Transition to Norfolk and Pursuing Cybersecurity

Upon graduating from high school, I thought to myself that I should stay in Norfolk, Virginia, where Old Dominion University resided with its newer Cybersecurity program. I loved having the familiarity of my hometown and being able to start on a new chapter in my academic

journey. Arriving at ODU, I was immediately welcomed into a vibrant community of like-minded individuals with a shared passion for technology and cybersecurity. Many of the peers I have met are becoming life-long friends that I can grow with. I am now a RA helping others, giving them a great campus experience as I was given when I first arrived at ODU. This has helped me get to know even more people.

Academic Journey at ODU

At ODU, my passion for cybersecurity flourished as I found a range of courses and projects. From introductory classes on Linux and Windows System Management and Security to advanced studies in Digital Forensics, I honed my skills and understanding of cybersecurity principles. I learned how to navigate through Linux and did some penetration testing with "John the Ripper" , a program to brute force passwords. My Windows System Management and Security class helped me create a Windows Server and manage it. My Digital Forensics class is where I learned to unravel the mysteries hidden within digital evidence. The interdisciplinary nature of the program broadened my horizons, revealing the diverse applications of cybersecurity in business, government, and defense. The guidance and mentorship provided by esteemed faculty members further fueled my curiosity and desire to make a difference in the cybersecurity realm.

My IDS 493 class is teaching me how to create the perfect e-Portfolio. An article that left a lasting impression on me was "The Psychology of Life Stories" by Dan P. McAdams (McAdams, 2001). This paper goes into the power of life narratives in shaping individuals' identities and how the stories we tell about ourselves influence our motivations and future paths. Integrating elements of storytelling in my ePortfolio allowed me to present my academic and

military experiences coherently, showcasing how each chapter in my life story contributes to the bigger picture of becoming a Cryptologic Warfare Officer.

Discovering Navy ROTC and Cryptologic Warfare

As I explored opportunities beyond the classroom, I was introduced to the Navy ROTC program, which opened a new avenue of service to my country. The idea of combining my passion for cybersecurity with military service resonated deeply with me, and I eagerly embraced the prospect of becoming a Cryptologic Warfare Officer. The role presented a unique chance to utilize my cybersecurity expertise in protecting national security interests and engaging in intelligence operations. Navy ROTC can be challenging as I have to wake up very early, but knowing that I am helping my country and fighting for our freedom, I am willing to lose a few hours of sleep.

Embracing the Navy ROTC Internship

In my sophomore year, I was given the opportunity to apply for the Navy ROTC internship at RTC Great Lakes, a prestigious training center for future naval officers. This internship is very selective, and my unit chose me as they deem me to have great leadership ability. The internship offered hands-on experience in a military environment, fostering leadership skills while applying cybersecurity knowledge in real-world scenarios. As I received the news of my selection, I felt a mixture of excitement and responsibility, knowing that this experience would shape my future as a naval officer.

The Navy ROTC Internship at RTC Great Lakes

Upon arriving at RTC Great Lakes, I underwent rigorous training and orientation, immersing myself in the traditions and principles of the Navy. As a Midshipman Instructor, my role was to mentor and guide Midshipman Candidates, young individuals aspiring to become

naval officers through the NROTC program. The internship instilled a sense of pride and honor in serving my country, while also presenting physical and mental challenges that tested my resilience. The camaraderie with my fellow Midshipman Instructors further strengthened my commitment to the Navy and its core values.

Applying Cybersecurity Skills in the Internship

A pivotal project during the internship involved delivering an Operational Security (OPSEC) briefing to the Midshipman Candidates. Utilizing my cybersecurity expertise, I emphasized the significance of safeguarding sensitive information in a digitally connected world. The experience provided valuable insights into communicating complex concepts to a non-technical audience. As I stood before the Candidates, I felt a sense of responsibility to share my knowledge and skills, knowing that the future of national security rested in their hands. Additionally, "Henry's Top Soft Skills in the 21st Century Workplace" provided by the author Hannah Henry, explored the essential soft skills required for success in today's professional world; the one that stood out was leadership (Henry, 2019). Leadership is something that makes Naval Officers. Naval Officers need to lead from the front and take care of those below them.

Relevance of ODU Curriculum to the Internship

The coursework at ODU in Cybersecurity played a critical role in preparing me for the challenges encountered during the internship. Concepts such as network security, cryptography, and ethical hacking directly applied to the cybersecurity aspects of the OPSEC briefing, underscoring the value of the ODU curriculum. The hands-on projects and practical exercises at ODU provided a solid foundation, empowering me to confidently apply my knowledge in a real-world setting. As well, being a leader is something the ODU Curriculum has taught me through the Naval Science classes such as "Leadership and Management".

Impact of the Internship on College and Future Career Plans

The Navy ROTC internship has been a transformative experience, reaffirming my commitment to a career as a Cryptologic Warfare Officer. The exposure to military leadership, camaraderie with fellow Midshipman Instructors, and witnessing the personal growth of the Midshipman Candidates have left a lasting impact on my college journey and future professional path. The internship has instilled in me a strong sense of duty and service, propelling me towards a career dedicated to protecting the nation's security.

Conclusion

From my childhood fascination with technology in Dayton to my journey as a future Cryptologic Warfare Officer at ODU, my path to cybersecurity has been shaped by pivotal moments and experiences. The Navy ROTC internship has been a defining chapter, where I merged my passion for technology with my desire to serve my country. As I look ahead to my graduation and commissioning in Spring 2025, I am filled with excitement and determination to embark on a fulfilling career that combines my love for cybersecurity and my commitment to defending national security interests. My journey is far from over, but I am grateful for the experiences that have led me to this moment, and I am eager to make a difference in the ever-changing landscape of cybersecurity.

References

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