

Narrative Essay

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My journey into the field of Cybersecurity is a conventional one with the exception of one caveat in that my initial goal in life was to major in Parks and Recreation upon graduating high school. Fortunately for me, my decisions and the paths I have taken that ultimately led me to pursue a career in Cybersecurity begin with my decision to join the Navy right out of high school almost 13 years ago. My 9-year enlistment in the Navy working with various radar and satellite equipment, as well as working side by side with various security experts on classified systems made the transition into Old Dominion University's School of Cybersecurity a natural and logical one in the grand scheme of things. This field piqued my interest as it is an ever-changing and evolving field full of new challenges, which in my opinion, mirrors my own life. I am not the type of person to resign myself to a career filled with monotony. I crave to continue to hone my skills and evolve alongside my career path. Cybersecurity is perfect in that regard due to the expectations of someone working in the field. You must be able to adapt and learn various systems and programs such as Azure, Linux, and the programs present such as Threat locker and Wireshark. There is always a new application being developed to meet the challenges that nefarious actors bring to the table daily.

What got me here?

In high school, I was always "tech savvy", sometimes to a fault, in which I will elaborate on soon. I first took an interest in computers and cybersecurity, somewhat still in its infancy, when I was in 9th grade. I emphasize on the "infancy" stage because my high school was able to secure a contract with Apple for an experimental learning experience (at the time) in which every

student would receive a personal MacBook. Being in 9th grade with an interest in computers, I of course, “acquired” the administrative password and went into the school’s system to allow certain programs to run. I then installed ‘Halo: Combat Evolved’ onto my fellow peer’s computers for recreational purposes. This event was the catalyst that sparked a lifelong drive to learn more about computers and ultimately led to my pursuing of a degree in Cybersecurity.

The Building Blocks

Cybersecurity wasn’t always at the forefront of my mind. While on deployments in the Navy I was mostly just trying to do my job, eat, and go to sleep most days. My curiosity and entry into the field began when I finally got off the ship and onto shore duty in Virginia Beach. Being stationed at a training command with a plethora of civilian contractors with knowledge in the field was extremely beneficial. Hearing them speak about their experience and the different types of jobs they did solidified my choice to begin pursuing my degree upon the completion of my Navy contract.

Gaining experience in the field at an entry level proved to be a bit daunting as I learned about all of the certifications I was going to need to obtain. In this regard, I began working on “MTA Networking Fundamentals”, a now retired certification, in hopes of being accepted into a highly competitive internship with Microsoft. Unfortunately, I was not accepted, but earning that certification gave me the motivation to continue my education, earn my degree, and utilize various online resources to study for the industry standard certifications such as Security+.

Facing Challenges

Upon entering ODU's cyber program, I found myself lucky that I had previously obtained an associate's degree in general studies whilst in the Navy. This allowed me to skip many of the general education requirements and skip right into the world of cybersecurity. However, I faced challenges in that I could not pass precalculus for the life of me. My first attempt at this course ended in total failure and I began to feel discouraged as this essentially meant I was "locked out" of the main courses needed to obtain my degree. I decided to sign up for some other courses and "skip a semester" regarding precalculus in order to utilize resources such as Udemy to study and brush up on my math, a skill that I never really mastered. This did not prove to help me and I quickly gave up yet again. However, as the saying goes; "third time's the charm." I was able to pass after seriously buckling down and studying daily and with friends. I was able to pull through the course with a C and experience the sweet feeling of registering for my core cybersecurity courses.

After my successful registration, I began what was essentially my "final semester" before commencement and earning my degree. Up until this point I had taken a few technical courses such as learning about operating systems and delving deeper into Linux and the commands utilized on that OS. This final semester proved to be slightly difficult. However, the upside to that was that I "threw myself into the deep end" and signed up for an introduction to coding class, a skill I had never really grasped before. While it wasn't my favorite course and I definitely struggled a bit, I learned about myself that I can essentially persevere and learn anything I need to in the field of cybersecurity in order to succeed in the future.

What's Next?

With all the boxes checked for my degree, the only thing remaining is my internship in which I was very lucky to be skilled at social networking as the pickings were quite slim for valid internships. I am currently interning as a Cyber Security Analyst with hopes of signing on with the company at the end of the internship. My hard work is finally beginning to pay off in that I'm actually learning AND doing, rather than just working in sandbox environments on virtual machines. It is challenging at times as I learn about new programs such as "Threatlocker" and "Cyberdrain" and am expected to become somewhat of a subject matter expert on it, but the work is very rewarding and allows me to see that I made the right career choice.

Conclusion

In reflection, my journey into cybersecurity has been anything but conventional. My early curiosity, military experience, personal challenges, and both my successful and unsuccessful attempts to adapt and grow in the field shaped my journey. From getting into trouble for installing games on school laptops in my first year of high school to troubleshooting advanced radar and satellite systems in the Navy, each step brought me closer to a career that aligns with both my skill set and my drive for continued experience and education. The setbacks I faced, whether academic or professional ended up serving as valuable lessons which allowed me to solidify my determination to succeed in a field where change is constant and being able to adapt to new technology is absolutely essential. Now, "getting my feet wet", so to speak in my professional career as a cybersecurity analyst intern, I feel confident in my ability to rise to any challenge. My path may have started unconventionally, but it has uniquely prepared me for the ever-changing world of cybersecurity that lies ahead.

