

Persistence Owed the World

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Abstract

This narrative explores a deeply personal and transformative journey marked by perseverance, reinvention, and an unwavering commitment to service. From a 15-year career in the United States Navy to an unexpected medical retirement, I was faced with the collapse of carefully laid plans and the harsh realities of starting over. Initially drawn to botany as a healing pursuit, I quickly realized that my true calling, my enduring need to serve, remained unfulfilled. Through introspection and the guidance of mentors, I redirected my focus to cybersecurity, a field where I could protect and defend in a new way. Despite significant obstacles, physical limitations, self-doubt, and the challenge of transitioning into a highly technical field, I persisted. From community college to Old Dominion University, through internships, job rejections, and eventual breakthroughs, I found both purpose and validation. This narrative is not only a reflection of the trials I've endured but also a testament to resilience, adaptability, and the power of finding meaning in service once again—this time, through the lens of cybersecurity.

Keywords: Cybersecurity, Persistence, Interdisciplinary, Service

Persistence Owed the World

I have come to find that many a lesson has been hard learned on this path. I have found that world owes me nothing, everything I have, I have earned. The horrors persist yet so do I. And with that I succinctly describe my personal, professional and academic journey. Despite those aforementioned details, I have always been called to serve. It is why I joined the United States Navy, and yet many of those details might be left for another time, suffice it to say, I served until it broke me mentally and physically. That is no exaggeration, I only served fifteen

years, two months and three days, after which they deigned to medically retire me. All my plans to retire in five years, debt free, had withered, unfulfilled.

I still had a family to care for and I needed a way by which to do that, and my skills were not developed for the civilian world, I believed I had no recourse but to do something that lie with my hobby's woodcraft or plants. I started to attend Tidewater Community College, taking a focus for a degree in botany. The ultimate plan was with this degree I would open a nursery providing regionally rare plants, trees and aquatics. After about a year of schooling, I found something gnawing at me. I was unsure how to place it, it wasn't the depression I battled with, nor related to the Fibromyalgia, it was something else. It did take some time and some soul searching, speaking with peers and mentors to realize what was wrong. Playing in the dirt and growing plants was going to leave me unfulfilled. I was not going to fill that desire to serve selling plants, no matter how rare and cool they might be. So, I sought a new path, a new choice that fell within my physical capabilities. I looked at the world around me, the threats I could identify and what I could do about them. I experienced how my loved ones and I had suffered from ill actions of those that would use our data for their gain. I decided the best way I could serve was to become a protector and defender of data. I would change my degree path to that of Cybersecurity. It was not without its own challenges, however... I was and old dog trying to learn new tricks. I was taking classes with, if I were to be honest, children. They were quicker, smarter, more apt towards the subject matter.

I did make good on my new mission, I graduated from Tidewater Community College, Magna Cum Laude, and was then able to transfer to Old Dominion University. I found I had enough credits entering Old Dominion University to finish my bachelor's within one year. Knowing that I had a requirement for an internship and needed to start on my new career, I began

my job hunt along with my course work. My coursework was again challenging, I often found myself out of my depth, unsure of success. To further hurt my sense of self, I was met with denial after denial of near on 100 or more job and internship applications. What was wrong with me? Why could I not get even one interview? How could I reconcile the fact that I was once a leader of men, responsible for over fifteen million dollars in equipment and ordnance, a Chief Petty Officer in the United States Navy, and I could not even land an interview? It was a blow to my persona to be sure, the horrors persist, and yet... so do I.

I did finally get a call, two in fact! One from One Main Financial and the other from of all places the Navy Exchange Command Headquarters. Was it irony that it was the Navy Exchange Command would choose to interview a patron or the fact that I applied for three different of their available internships, and the odds were just in my favor. I interviewed for two of those internships along with the one from One Main Financial. The thing here was of the three interviews, only one of them was in my chosen field of cybersecurity. What seemed like nearly a lifetime, but only approximately two months I did get a call back from the Navy Exchange Command Headquarters. They offered me a position in their PC Lab providing tier two support as an intern in their headquarters. Perhaps it was my own hurt ego, or the need to fulfill the internship requirement for my degree, I readily accepted the position.

To my elation, and ultimately my dismay, I received a call from One Main Financial offering me the cybersecurity internship. The call was a week before I was to start my internship with the Navy Exchange. It paid more than the Navy Exchange by almost double, and it was a one-hundred percent remote position! However, there was some miscommunication in that phone call, they took me saying I had already accepted the internship at the Navy Exchange, as me turning down the opportunity with One Main Financial, even though I expressed that I would

much prefer to take the role at One Main. I did not hear from them again, so I assumed I should continue and do the internship at the Navy Exchange. The thing that my time at this internship, that I was able to put together along with the coursework in my degree, was that while I was not doing a specifically cybersecurity internship, the interdisciplinary nature of cybersecurity allowed me to succeed strongly at the internship. It was with this success I was I was able to catch the attention of the Senior Vice President of the department and that of one of the professors at Old Dominion University.

This interdisciplinary nature of cybersecurity allowed me to find that a strong technical and networking background make for a strong foundation as someone seeking a role in cybersecurity. So, with that in mind, and the literally hundreds and hundreds of unrealized job applications, I expanded my job search outside or at least adjacent to the cybersecurity field. Because of that I picked up another job after the internship as a Tier 1 Service Desk Agent for the world's largest intranet, the Navy Marine Corps Intranet. The professor I impressed took me under her wing, led me to an organization called AFCEA, formerly called the Armed Forces Communications and Electronics Association. It was here I started networking with industry leaders in cybersecurity who also partnered not far from home to me, the United States Navy. I started to feel more relaxed about my position, while still a student there was a bright marker, an outstanding opportunity on the horizon. I need only persist and so yet, I do so.

Conclusion

I am currently a month away from graduation, I have had three job interviews in the cybersecurity field in the past week, and I have been accepted into Graduate School at Old Dominion University. And while in this narrative I have not delved in to the deepest darkest details, I insist that I have persisted, beyond the horrors. I will see my hard work come to

fruition, without having to reconcile with who I used to be. I will instead be able to embrace it and use what I have learned in that time and what I continue to learn in various roles to enhance myself as an aspiring cybersecurity professional. I continue to become more marketable, and if my selection for internship at the Navy Exchange Command Headquarters should of taught me anything along this journey, was that I had to find the right audience with who to market myself. I am a United States Navy Chief Petty Officer, and it will make me an effective Cybersecurity Professional, who will not give up, who can make the hard choices, and who will continue to persist.