

I have a little over a year to go before I retire from the Air Force. When I signed up for military service in 1994, I thought this day would never come. I don't mean that it was so far off that it didn't seem real – I mean that I had zero intention of being in the Air Force long enough to retire. Prior to that year, I didn't really consider military service an option even though I felt it was probably something I should do. Since around middle school, I was set on going to medical school. I didn't know anything about military medicine, and I thought going to med school meant the military wasn't in my future.

When I was applying to medical school, I received a post card from the Navy advertising the Health Professions Scholarship Program. I could go to a civilian med school, have the military pay for it, and then serve my country for four years. It sounded great to me, so I asked my military relatives what they thought about the idea. I had relatives in all branches except for the Coast Guard, and every one of them said “That does sound great! But you should see if the Air Force offers the same thing.” I'm clearly biased now, but I think that was good advice!

In medical school, my plan was to do my one year internship and then complete my military obligation as a flight doc. I would then re-enter civilian life and do a surgical residency, content that I'd checked the “serve my country” box. After my internship, I went to Vance Air Force Base as a flight doc. Enid, Oklahoma was flat, brown, and windy, with oppressive summer heat yet biting winter cold. My hours were long, and I processed more flying waiver paperwork than I thought possible. I often slept at the office in a sleeping bag just to get caught up on things. Despite all that, my experience at Vance led to my staying in as long as I have.

At Vance, we had one mission – make pilots. Everything we did was somehow directed to training the next generation of pilots, and we knew that was important. So the long hours and the paperwork meant something. However, the people were the main reason I decided to stick around longer than I'd planned. My medical colleagues were wonderful. My patients were the same people I worked with, their families, or retirees. We were a team, and being part of a team even helped make the Enid weather a little more tolerable!

Twenty years in, there have been days where I think I should have gotten out earlier, made more money, and avoided getting moved around. But when those days come, I try to reflect on what our mission is, what opportunities the Air Force has given me and those I care about, and how fortunate I am to work with as many great people as I do. I'd be lying if I said I'm not excited about my retirement plans next summer, but I'd also be lying if I said I won't miss being part of the team.

Tuper, Gale T Jr Col USAF 10 MGD (US)

gale.t.tuper.mil@mail.mil

719-333-5522