

Interview by Dr. Tara Hembrough with Student Veteran Max Brownlee

Conducted fall 2016 at Southeastern Oklahoma State University

TH: Can you tell me how old you are?

MB: I'm about to be twenty-six in another week.

TH: Can you tell me where you're originally from?

MB: I'm from Sherman, TX.

TH: Where do you live now?

MB: Still in Sherman, TX.

TH: What's your major?

MB: Professional Aviation

TH: How long have you been attending? Did you attend anywhere else before SE?

MB: I did. I attended a year and a half at Grayson.

TH: When did you know you wanted to do aviation?

MB: Probably 2009 or 2010. Ironically, I originally joined the military to try to be a pilot, but back during the surge of 2007, they wouldn't take you if you had corrective vision. So I decided to do something else.

TH: Tell me about how you decided to go into the military. Tell me your story.

MB: I really don't have an impressive story. I honestly woke up one day and said, "I'm going to join the military." Then I started talking to a few of my friends our senior year of high school, who had already enlisted, and it was kind of weighing on me, but I wasn't taking it very seriously. I talked to a few recruiters and took a few tests to go for aviation, and then that fell through, so I didn't think too much about it until one morning I woke up and said, "Hey, I'm going to go to the Army." Went to the recruiter's office and took the test and came home and told my parents, "Hey, guess what, I've joined the Army." I was already committed and didn't want to be talked out.

TH: What did they say?

MB: They freaked out.

TH: Did you have any kind of family military history?

MB: No, not really. My grandfather was a fighter pilot in WWII, and that was about it. My parents tried to talk me out of it. They definitely tried.

TH: What about the Army interested you? What was your reason? What did you think you would do being part of the Army? What did you want out of it or what did you want to put in?

MB: Realistically, I didn't have to work really hard as a child. I lived a pretty comfortable life. I was tired of any accomplishment I ever made was kind of overshadowed because I could accomplish this because I came from a good background. I decided I was going to do something for myself, where my family doesn't have any influence; this was going to be for me. I wanted to prove a few things for myself.

TH: What did you think you would be able to prove? Just that you could live on your own?

MB: That I didn't need anybody for anything.

TH: What about the Army as opposed to one of the other branches?

MB: I liked the size of it. It's the biggest branch with the most assets. I wanted to have the option to go anywhere. In my naive mind, I thought that was a possibility. You kind of go where they tell you to, and I didn't go a whole lot of great places. In hindsight, I wouldn't change it for the world. Going to the worst places was a little bit better.

TH: So you went through boot camp since you went right out of high school, did you go that route?

MB: Yes. After I graduated, I had four days until I shipped out. It was an interesting summer.

TH: What was happening in the world at that point where you thought, "If I'm sent here, I'm going to be part of this conflict?"

MB: I had followed 9/11 very closely and still remember where I was. I was in 5th grade, and it always struck home with me so that was always in the back of my mind and joining during a time of war, I knew I was going somewhere. I knew it was going to happen one way or another. You're not going to have a career and not go.

TH: Tell me what's your race.

MB: Caucasian.

TH: Tell me about the military, how did you feel, did people accept you, what was it like?

MB: For the most part, people were really accepting, especially in the beginning, everyone is in the same terrifying state you are in, so that seems to bring people together really well when there's so much unknown. It brings people together. It opens up those circles of communication, so everyone can be on the same page. It was actually a great experience.

TH: Tell me a little bit about where you went to, where you were deployed?

MB: I was in Afghanistan.

TH: How many times were you deployed?

MB: I only went once. That was for a year.

TH: What was your military specialty? MOS?

MB: I was a field artillery guy.

TH: Did you get to pick that job?

MB: Yes, I did.

TH: What did you like about that job?

MB: I really liked blowing things up. I was a young kid and just wanted to blow something up and get paid for it. Kind of got that out of my system.

TH: Why do you say that?

MB: You can't really continue to blow stuff up as an adult because it doesn't look too good, so I thought I would get that out while I was young. It was fun; I enjoyed it for the most part.

TH: How did you see people from different backgrounds fitting in during your time? Did you see women having problems? Other races or minorities having issues?

MB: We didn't have any women in the unit I was in, in the larger unit yes we did, but I was combat harms specialist so at that time, I know right now they're doing integration for women, but at that time, there weren't any women in ours. People from other races, there's so much diversity that it's not uncommon to see someone from the Philippines, this guy from Guam, this guy is African American, it doesn't matter; you're all wearing the same uniform. Nobody really cares. No one cares where you came from, who you are, what you are, you're my brother, so everybody worked together really well.

TH: How long were you or are you still in the National Guard?

MB: No, I received a medical discharge in 2012.

TH: Do you think otherwise you would have stayed in?

MB: Yes, I would have.

TH: How many years total were you in?

MB: Just short of five.

TH: What happened after that? Did you decide to go to Grayson?

MB: Yeah, so after the medical discharge, I moved back immediately, got a job, and I got out in November of 2012, and so the fall semester was just about to end, so I enrolled for the following semester, so I went immediately to school.

TH: Then you knew you wanted to go into aviation?

MB: Yes.

TH: What kinds of things can instructors especially need to know concerning people, who are currently in the military, wish instructors or other students would know?

MB: We need to focus on communication between the veteran, whether they're already out or still in, there needs to be clear, concise communication between that student and the instructor because that instructor has no idea what you do, your military involvement, so whenever I heard that someone told their professor that they were leaving, while there are circumstances that you don't know until the last minute and you take off, a lot of people have an issue pre-planning and letting people know ahead of time. Not only does the instructor need to be aware of that, but the student needs to take it upon his/her self to go ahead and do that. Also, understanding that occasionally these instances are going to arise.

TH: What would you advise students to do? Would you advise them to communicate with the professor as the beginning of the semester?

MB: The first thing I would do. I would go up to the professor and introduce myself and say I'm so-and-so and just so you know, at some point in the semester, I might have to do this or have to do that. I'm part of this organization. There needs to be that basis set by the student veteran.

TH: Why do you think students, do they not feel comfortable, do they not know the instructor, do they not know how the instructor's going to react, is it about the military integration with the student identity, they don't really want to share that, or just different reasons for different people?

MB: I think it's, of course different reasons for different people, but a lot of people, I know for myself, again I'm not in the National Guard or Army Reserves, but I don't tell a lot of people about my veteran status because I like to keep apples and bananas separate. That was my life then, and this is my life now. I think a lot of it in my mind has to do with receiving preferential treatment because typically, "Oh, hey, I'm a veteran, so I'm going to look out for you." I think it comes from such a good place and such an admirable view for an instructor to have, but I don't want you to look at me differently than the person sitting next to me.

TH: Have other students talked to you about that? Have other veterans talked about that, too?

MB: Not really. There's such a small group in the aviation community. Everybody already knows. I think there are only four or five of us in the entire aviation program. I can't speak too heavily on that. I can say that in my other classes, my general education classes, it's not really spoken about too much.

TH: Can you tell if other students in the classroom are veterans?

MB: Oh, yeah, I can see them from across the room.

TH: How do you know?

MB: You tend to carry yourself a certain way. I'll throw myself under the bus. I keep my hair cut a pretty professional way. That's typically a giveaway, at least the males, but it's really about how you carry yourself.

TH: How would you describe that?

MB: I can tell you've been around the block once or twice, you're not straight out of high school with your eyes open on the big huge world. I can just see it in your eyes. I don't really look too much at clothing because you can change really fast, and it depends on what you are doing. It's really just a moderate air of confidence you have about yourself because you know you can handle whatever it thrown at you in school because you've dealt with worse.

TH: So transitioning back to college, I've heard others say that it was difficult to go back to something that was calmer.

MB: It was at first. I was used to a different environment, and it was a high pace. Luckily, I'm in aviation, so I get a little bit of that excitement of "Hey, I'm going to fly an airplane today, not I'm going to go sit in a classroom for seven hours and try to stay awake." That was a big transition.

TH: Is there anything teachers can do about that, or is that just the nature of college?

MB: It's just the nature of the beast; it is what it is. I mean, I know so many professors that do such a great job of making classes interesting, but you can only make it so interesting because you are still sitting in a classroom. It's just part of it.

TH: When you're in class, do you like to talk about your experiences as a veteran in a general education classroom?

MB: I, personally, don't. I'm lucky because my best friend/roommate was in the military with me. He was my team leader, and I was just a private when I showed up, and then he got promoted, and I got promoted. We both got out relatively soon of each other and then said, "Let's go fly some planes." I'm lucky that I have that outlet, but not everybody does. We kind of keep the military status for the most part to ourselves.

TH: Do you think that students, veterans or ROTC, would like to be together with non-traditional students?

MB: I think so.

TH: Or having that option anyway?

MB: I believe so. I think that option is really good because you would feel more comfortable around people, who have had similar experiences as you have. I think that's a good outlet for people and a good environment for people to put themselves in or at least have the option to. I'm a big supporter of that; I think it's a great idea.

TH: Do you think they would feel more comfortable if they wanted to share their military experiences in writing if they were around other veterans?

MB: I would say writing is such a better form of communication because in a sense it's still mildly anonymous. There's not a face to the writing. If I were taking the class, I would feel more

open to sharing my experiences rather than talking out loud or with other people, who don't know where I'm coming from. Then you get labeled. I think it's a great idea.