

Ready, Set, Airlift! Ep. 13 Enlisted To Officer

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Julian Hernandez: Welcome, Alamo Wing members and fans to a special in between UTA edition of Ready, Set, Airlift. I'm your host, Julian Hernandez from the Wing Public Affairs team. For this episode, we are highlighting the story of a 433rd Airlift Wing Reserve Citizen Airman who completed the transition from enlisted to officer.

First Lieutenant Frankie Jenkins, formerly Master Sergeant Jenkins, faced a long list of challenges on the road to commissioning, but in the end, his determination to never give up got him to where he wanted to be. Lieutenant Jenkins sat down with my colleague, Master Sergeant Jacob Lewis, to discuss how he achieved his goal of becoming an officer.

Master. Sgt. Jacob Lewis: All right, Lieutenant Jenkins, thank you so much for being here today. I really appreciate your time. You having a good day so far, sir? I'm having a wonderful day. Excellent. I really appreciate it. So recently you went from your ascension from Master Sergeant to now a First Lieutenant, would you shed light upon that?

How did that come about? That's a very interesting question. I. Took about 450 plus days to actually commission. I did it through the direct commission process. So what I did was I went over and I first saw a position on what is called the reserve vacancies and they had a social worker position on there.

1st Lt. Frankie Jenkins: So I called the recruiter. And we got started on a direct commission package and the direct commission package, what it is, is basically, you know, for lawyers, doctors, nurses, social workers, psychologists, basically your resume, your degree, your license is everything that goes towards the board and all of that gets processed and then make a decision from there.

Like I said, it took about 450 plus days. To get done, but yeah, like direct commission is just going to the recruiter and hoping for the best. Yes, sir. So I know you successfully made the ascension using direct commission. Did you try other methods to try to become officer? How was that? Oh yes. Yes, sir. I did.

I went through Well, we used to call them deserving airmen boards. I'm not really sure what they're called now, but I went through two deserving airmen boards. I spoke with the army reserve. I spoke with the army national guard to look at commissioning with them. Even spoke with. Air National Guard to look at commissioning with them on the second commissioning board.

I remember a lieutenant colonel was on top of the panel, he was in charge of the panel. And what he said to me was, you should get another degree. At this time, I only had my, my bachelor's in, in psychology. So he told me that I should get another degree. So I did went out there and, and got my degree in social work, came back with a much stronger GPA, and that allowed me to go the direct commission route, you know, direct commission, you have to have certain degrees to where as if you wanted to standard commission, you could just do it with a bachelor's or what have you.

So his advice, my failure at first is what pushed me over to success. Success. Absolutely. So on that note about facing adversity and then taking it on head first, others who are also trying to make this leap from enlisted to officer, would you want to expand upon your advice or your message you would like to relate to them?

My number one advice is don't quit. Don't quit. Don't give up. Really? Really? Right? Like don't quit at all. It's not over until It's actually over in a sense, you know, like you haven't failed until you quit yourself. As long as you still are within the parameters of age requirements, as long as you are still eligible, the only person that's stopping you realistically is yourself.

If one door is not opening for you, go to another door. But you can reach your dreams It's all about your tenacity and your willingness to drive forward. Road bumps are coming. Yes, sir. Perfect. So on that note about your road and your, the career path you've taken, how many years have you served in the military so far?

I am on my 14th year. 14th year. Yes, sir. Excellent. So you just hit the big, big reset button on the officer side. Yes, sir. As of right now, could you just give us a brief summary about your, your ascension to master sergeant? And I know

you're in command post. Can you shed light on upon your career in the air force?

Actually, I started off in aircraft maintenance. So I came in as a hydraulic troop, worked on the great C5 for many years. From there, I ended up having a shoulder injury, which put me in mock and that shoulder injury actually. Changed the trajectory of where I was heading in a sense, right? Like I got into mock and once I got into mock, we were in command post.

Working in command post as mock. And from there, making friends with the people in command posts. Quite a funny story. I didn't even know what the command post was. Didn't know the command post phone number, any of that stuff, right? Like I've just a hard charging flight line guy. Everything else is just everything else.

But being in the command post for a little while, I got to see exactly what they did. And I decided to apply for a job in there upon doing that, learned everything that goes on in the command post, went through tech school and, you know, the rest is kind of history in a sense. So it was aircraft maintenance.

Mock, and then command post and now on the medical. Excellent. So two part question, what inspired you to join the air force? Did you originally want to be a mechanic? Very good question. What inspired me to join the air force? My father was in the army. This was more so before I was born, but you know, it's a legacy thing.

Right. And I, I really wanted to join the military, but I grew up in Augusta, Georgia, which was right, like right there at Fort Gordon, right down the street. And from there, I apologize, but I saw a lot of army life and I was like, that's not for me, you know, from that point. I actually had friends that went to the Air Force and I learned more so about what the Air Force was about, you know, because I grew up in an army town and our schools were like every ROTC program was basically either army or Marines.

And I had a stepbrother that went to the Navy, so I knew more of that, but once I learned about the Air Force and their principles, their values, well, our principles, our values, I knew that that was the direction that I wanted to go. What's the second part? Did you want to be a maintainer? Was that more you?

Master. Sgt. Jacob Lewis: Was that a recruiter? Ah, that's, that's the really good question right there. So. Did I want to be a maintainer? Yes and no. Originally, when I first started looking at enlisting, I had already had an

associate's degree in psychology, so I was already moving towards mental health. But as I was coming in, it wasn't available before I enlisted.

1st Lt. Frankie Jenkins: I worked in the banking industry, so I worked at a credit union. So I was like, okay, I'll do finance was not available. So since my first two choices were, were gone, I was like, well, I'm joining the air force, I don't want to fly a plane, but at least I can fix one. So that's the direction I went and hydro here I come.

Master. Sgt. Jacob Lewis: Yes, sir. Excellent. So, next question is culmination of your career, you're a maintainer, you're working in the command post, mock, and social work as well, your degree in psychology. Do these jobs parallel? Was this purely a coincidence? Where does your heart lie? Is it in social work? My heart definitely lies in social work.

1st Lt. Frankie Jenkins: You're, you're on it with these questions. So that's another great question. My heart is definitely within social work. So when I went to tech school as a command post controller, I had already gained or achieved my license in social work. So I'd already become a tech. LMSW, it's just command post and being an art here, pay the bills.

So social workers was on the side, but now social work is at the forefront and that's another reason why you don't quit. Like you keep going because you'll eventually get to where you want to go. But social work has always been a big thing for me. I was raised by my grandmother and she was. Deeply, deeply in the church and we were in a, you know, country, rural part of Georgia.

So I feel like I first saw social work from her and her friends. Sure. They didn't have degrees and you know, they didn't have titles, but that was the example. Right. And I moved towards it just based off that I've always loved helping people. The interesting thing about social work is that. Most people don't know how vast the career is and all the things that you can do within the confines of social work, right?

Like me, personally, I'm a therapist, but. I could have been a case manager. I could have been a researcher. So many things that I've could have done with social work. I think it's interesting to go back to where you were kind of leading as far as like, how does it intermingle with my career path? I have had so many wonderful conversations and done so many great things within my Air Force career that directly correlate to social work.

I. Right now, I am a part of the diversity and inclusion program. So me and Burrell, we go out, we do the DNI classes. That's really cool. I worked in Green Dot before I became a MRT, Master Resiliency Trainer. Like all of this stuff kind of lines up with what a social worker. Absolutely. Perfect. Sounds like you're different.

Master. Sgt. Jacob Lewis: Military career paths, giving you a lot of diversity and view upon the military and built you up to this moment. You have followed your heart and now you've landed into now being an officer. How do you feel about becoming an officer? Was there something in the Particular that inspired you to want to become an officer again, you're on it, you're on it with the questions.

1st Lt. Frankie Jenkins: I like this. This is great. So it's always what I aspire to do and to become. It's, it's interesting because I almost changed paths in a sense. Almost changed paths. So becoming an officer was always the goal as it pertained to joining the military. Like, sure. I went enlisted, but from there, it's like, it's almost like everybody else, right?

You enlist if you need a resource. Right? Like most of us in some way seek out educational benefits and things of that nature. So that's what I did. I moved towards like, okay, I can accrue time as enlisted and I can work towards becoming an officer. That's my ultimate goal. So that's the way that I push forward towards it.

Me becoming an officer. It's everybody within my family was enlisted. I want it to be the first to be something greater. Now, really cool. Or, in my opinion, really cool. I did get to see my brother in law commission. So he was the first on his side of the family to commission. But after that, you know, it's my turn.

It's my time. So, yes, sir. Just got to keep pushing towards it. Step up for the family, for the country and follow your path. Speaking of overcoming obstacles and achieving your goals, following your heart, was there a particular moment where you thought this isn't going to happen? You had mentioned just a moment ago where you thought about changing paths.

Master. Sgt. Jacob Lewis: So you persisted, landed the plane so far. Was there a particular moment that you thought it might be over? Man, if you guys could see my smile right now, if you could see it, yes, absolutely. Like I stated 450 plus days, the way that I got the word that I was commissioning was In my opinion, something miraculous in a sense, right?

1st Lt. Frankie Jenkins: It was actually on the 29th of July. I was just a regular Air Force day, went to command post as master sergeant Jenkins, and I left as first Lieutenant Jenkins. And that came from a text, you know, my recruiter text me and said, Hey, you know, everything has been approved. We can oath you in today. Uh, yeah, I'm, I'm on the way, I'm on the way, not hesitating on this one.

I'll be there. But prior to that, to more answer your question, right. Prior to that, she had told me that social workers were 130 percent man across Africa. So I wasn't going to be able to commission. Not in totality just right now, right? So she said that it could take either a year maybe two years and then we looked at it like okay Everything is good.

Your scroll is signed Everything is ready. If we do have to wait then, you know, we just have to do the medical portion again. Okay, cool So in my mind once she Said it could be a year, it could be two years and then 130 percent man. I'm like, okay, this isn't happening. This isn't happening. So, or at least it's not happening right now.

So I pushed forward with other things within my life and in my career, never quit, never gave up, I just didn't hit a pause button, always remained productive. Basically, but at that point I did think this probably isn't going to happen. Now, where I. almost changed course. I was working at Low Ridge Treatment Center.

And if for those of you that are not familiar, it's a mental health facility where they send active duty and veterans. You get some reserve there, you get some guard there as well. So it's like all it's a wing full of military personnel. And you get some reserve there. Once I was, once I began to work there as a social worker, I started to realize like, Hey, I don't really need to do it in uniform in order to serve the people that I most want to serve.

I can do it in this way. So I did that for three years. I worked at Laurel Ridge Treatment Center for three years. Cool enough. That's what gave me more experience and strengthened my commissioning package. But yeah, at that point I was like, you know, I'm happy here. I can do this. I can do it in this way.

So this is going to be cool. Fortunately, we're here. We're having this conversation. So, you know, we, we know it went, it went a different direction. Yes, sir. So it sounds like. Appreciate it. You thought the doors were closed and you were going to pursue the civilian side for where your heart lied and instead, because of your persistence and continuing to build up that package, you were able to get the ball in the end zone, essentially.

Master. Sgt. Jacob Lewis: So again, congratulations. You're just now beginning your officer career. So where do you go from here? How do you, how do you see your Air Force officer future? What are your goals? Before I actually commissioned my top goal, and this might sound superficial, I don't know, or maybe this is the way that a lot of people think.

1st Lt. Frankie Jenkins: I'm not really sure, but my top goal was to become major. That's where I aspire to be. I think now coming in as a first Lieutenant, I should be able to make captain in roughly two years, somewhere around there, depending on how I perform and then from there majors right around the corner, so. I see myself going a little bit further than that, and I definitely hope that I can get to a place of at least lieutenant colonel now, it's different when you're on the outside of it and you're like, well, if I can, I just want to make major, but now that you're in the game, you know, it's kind of like, I, I, I really like sports, right?

So it's kind of like that kid that's sitting on the bench, you score your first layup. Well, I can make 10 now. So, you know, there's just, Making it into the game, being invited to the dance, right? That, that changes everything. That changes the, the perspective. Because now, the, the limits are raised a little bit.

Master. Sgt. Jacob Lewis: So you weren't the first draft pick? No, second draft pick, but then you, you got it later? You know, General Jenkins, you know? Hey.

1st Lt. Frankie Jenkins: Maybe. Maybe. Yes, sir. Yes, sir. Got jokes. So I think a lot of the people tuning into this podcast are going to be interested in hearing your journey and how you overcame and persevered. We've already addressed this, but I want to go into it deeper. There might be others who are thinking about leaving the military due to dissatisfaction with their career or personal reasons.

Master. Sgt. Jacob Lewis: Lots of different potentials there. What message would you want to tell them? How should they proceed? They should proceed in however they see fit. This might be controversial, but the one big thing that really sticks out to me within my career is, I fully understand that this life isn't for everybody.

1st Lt. Frankie Jenkins: Right? And we should, and this is the therapist talking in me, I apologize, but we should strive for, you know, individual happiness. Now, if your individual happiness. Is uplifted by wearing the uniform as it is.

That's my individual happiness is uplifted by me wearing the uniform and serving. Then go for it.

And you shouldn't let anyone stop you from doing that. Going to have bad days. You're going to have bad supervisors. You're going to have bad supervision. These are things that should make you better. All of this should make you better, right? Your experiences, what you live through, what you go through.

Think about it in this, in this sense, right? Like a lot of people have the mindset of, well, this happened to me. No, no, no, no, no, no, no. Change that perspective. This happened for me. You gained something from it. Whatever the experience is, so sure, I could have taken the, you need another degree. No, here, no, here, no, here.

I could have taken that and just took my ball and went home. No, he didn't hold me back when he said I needed another degree. That happened for me. I went and got another degree and here we are, you know, like, so it wasn't somebody being mean to me or whatever. You have to look at criticism, all criticism, as constructive in a way.

You have to look at every day that you put on the uniform as constructive. Constructive. One thing I like to tell my patients on the therapist side is every day is a good day. Every day is a good day. You have to find the good. There is good within your career. There is good within the choices that you made and how you got here.

There is good in all of that. And then when there cease to be good in it, that's when it might be time to go. But outside of that, if you're still finding the good, Don't let anybody else take that good away from you. Other people come and go, sir. I love that. Finding the good in every day, even bad days are days of building character and reflection and making one stronger.

Master. Sgt. Jacob Lewis: Uh, you know, what doesn't kill you? Makes you stronger as the, as the word goes. So during this interview, one of the things that seems to be in your heart is being a social worker. You had already shed light upon your family members being some of the inspiration for you becoming a social worker. Do you want to shed more light upon what drives you to be a social worker?

1st Lt. Frankie Jenkins: It's the mission that social workers Live upon and it's the, man, it's the way that social workers move in a sense, it's, it's social justice, it's working for and fighting for other people, it's something far greater than

myself, you know, I couldn't be a social worker. Without helping someone else. That is the main goal and main focus of social work.

Ironically, you know, like I'm very introverted, so it's kind of hard for me to be social at times, but when it's one on one and, and when I'm working with individuals, something different comes out in me. And like, it's just in my spirit to be a helper, to help people achieve their goals. Biggest thing about social working is seeing it work.

Seeing it, you know, seeing everything that you're working on or towards come to fruition when, you know, you are providing therapy to somebody, when you are providing assistance to someone, and you see how it affects their lives, and when you see the changes that come about, when you see the fruit from the work that you've done.

That's like, just to me, like super inspiring. So, sir, I think I got the story and what I was looking for. I always end my interviews this way. Is there anything you want to add? Anything important that I might've overlooked? Hmm. No, I think you did a really good job. I like the questions. I think they were great questions.

The only thing that I would not add, but re attack is do not give up. Don't, don't give up until somebody says, Hey, you can not go any further. The game is not over. Perfect. Well, I think we're going to wrap it up, uh, Alamo wing citizen airmen. Thank you all for listening so much. Lieutenant Jenkins. Thank you for your time.

Master. Sgt. Jacob Lewis: Thank you so much for having me. Yes, sir. Thank you very much.

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available from the Wing Military and Family Readiness Center. Until then, stay sharp and stay safe.