

# **From Medical School to Pilot School**

“Any time you’re in the air is a good day.”

By Jessica Ferguson

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Grand Bay, Ala. – A journey begins with a single step, and for United States Air Force Pilot Bryant Bailey, that first step was away from medical school and into an ROTC office at Troy University.

Alabama native Capt. Bryant Bailey was studying Biomedical Sciences at Troy University when he made the decision to join the school’s Air Force ROTC (Reserve Officers’ Training Corps) program in 2012.

Serving others comes naturally for Bryant Bailey and in 2009, after graduating from Alma Bryant High School, he set off to Troy University in pursuit of a doctorate in medicine. As fate would have it, a doctorate in medicine would not be the way Bailey would continue serving people. In 2012 Bailey joined the Air Force ROTC, to serve his country.

“Have you ever thought about being a pilot?” Is a question that Bailey recalls being asked by a Lt. Colonel when he was first trying to join the Air Force ROTC at Troy University.

“So, I just kind of looked around and looked into it that summer, and I thought well this kind of strikes my fancy,” said Bailey. “If I am going to be in the Air Force, which is arguably the world’s largest flying club, I might as well be one of the flyers. So, I pivoted and started to do that and was fortunate enough to get picked up for it.”

The selection process for pilot positions in the Air Force is extremely competitive. Approximately half of the pilot slots each year are reserved for those that attend the Air Force Academy and the other half of the slots are left to be distributed throughout other collegiate ROTC cadets throughout

the United States and the OTS (Officer Training School) students. Although Troy University graduates Air Force Officers each year, Bailey was the first to secure a pilot slot in over eight years.

“He definitely has the aptitude to have done what he did, I never thought he would be a pilot for really for any military branch or even a private sector,” said Jeffrey Ferguson, a Hydraulics Maintainer in the Air Force and high school classmate/friend of Bailey’s. “I never really knew what he wanted to go into, but I definitely never saw him wanting to fly aircraft for a living.”

After graduating from Troy University and Commissioning with the Air Force, Bailey packed up his life and moved to Laughlin Air Force Base for pilot training school.

“The life I envisioned for myself changed when I met Bryant,” said Hillary Bailey, wife of Bryant Bailey. “He chose one of the hardest and most training intensive careers that I could ever imagine. He is never ever fully trained. He is constantly studying and learning new aspects regardless of the airframe he is flying. His attention to detail is incredible. I’m just so incredibly proud of my husband. He strives to be the best person he can be and help others around him be the best they can be!”

Following graduation from pilot training school, Bailey was tasked to fly the Lockheed C-130 Hercules, an American four-engine turboprop military aircraft designed for troop, medevac, and cargo transport.

Assigned to the 86<sup>th</sup> Airlift Wing at Ramstein Air Base in Germany, Bailey served four years with the C-130s. During his tenure in Germany Bailey logged 478 flights totaling 1,365 hours, of which 730 were combat support. Bailey stated that in his first two years at Ramstein he was gone approximately 273 days out of the year, flying various missions.

The crew-time is one of the best parts of the job, according to Bailey. “Flying in itself is fun to me, but it’s really the crew concept, when you’re down in a foreign country for two or three weeks at a time and get to know your crew and hear their stories and where they come from. All that is probably the most fun,” said Bailey.

In 2019, Bailey applied to cross-over to the new Boeing KC-46A Pegasus, an aerial refueling and strategic military transport aircraft designed to refuel all U.S., allied and coalition military aircraft while also being able to carry passengers, cargo, and patients.

“Bryant is a really smart guy, he is intelligent, he has a good head on his shoulders, he is very self-driven,” said Ferguson. “He doesn’t need to have someone else’s opinion to form his own...a very charismatic person, he also cares about other people but at the same time, he will put you in your place if you need to be put in one. He is a very straight-forward person.”

Officers in the Air Force are looked to for their leadership and guidance, a job that Bailey excels at. Aside from flying aircraft, pilots in the Air Force have a number of other tasks and “officership” duties.

“Flying is the biggest misconception about our job,” said Bailey. “Actual flying is probably 5 percent of what pilots do. Aside from that small percentage of flying, about 60 to 65 percent of the job is officership/deskwork and the rest is various tasks, flight planning, and briefings.”

In 2020, Bailey was selected for the KC-46A Pegasus and is now aiding in building the new 344<sup>th</sup> Air Refueling Squadron at McConnell Air Force Base in Wichita, Kansas. A task that is being done from the ground up.

The 344<sup>th</sup> squadron at McConnell Air Force Base began Phase One in 2019 with approximately 20-30 personnel in the entire squadron, consisting of mostly instructor pilots. When the final phase

completes, the squadron will have between 150-200 personnel. At this time, Bailey, along with the other personnel in the squadron are creating everything from Virtual Threat Recognition and Tactics courseware to determining crew and shop ratios.

“In the C-130 I have about 1,500 hours of flight time and about 700 sim time. In this new plane I have about 70 hours of sim time, and about 25 hours of flight time. I have enough to know how it works and I have a basic understanding of the mission set. That’s just a ‘for comparison’ notes on the experience level. It’s basically like starting over again,” said Bailey.

When asked about how different Bailey thinks flying the KC-46A to the C-130, he stated that he thinks the biggest difference is going to be working out all of the kinks that a new plane comes with. The C-130 has had time to see a lot of these kinks worked out, whereas the KC-46A is still very new.

“Learn as much as you can about the plane so when something does go wrong, because I had three engine failures in the C-130s, I knew how to handle them, but there are things that are going to go wrong, and when something does go wrong in this plane that you have enough knowledge and experience to draw back on to where it’s not a deadly mistake,” said Bailey. “Kind of like ole Sully said you got a bag of luck and a bag of experience, and you want to make sure that whenever it comes time, there is going to be an emergency one day, and you just hope you’ve got enough in that bag of luck and bag of experience to pay the bill.”

The KC-46A Pegasus will likely not roll out to Air Force bases until 2023-2024, at earliest.

“It’s kind of cliché, but it is probably the biggest thing as far as officership. You have to take care of the mission, but in order to take care of the mission you have to take care of your people,” said Bailey. “I am a firm believer of if you legitimately, honestly care about your people and not just

'hey how you guys doing' check a box and walk out the door. Like get to know the people that work for you, especially directly. Learn what their interested in, what their goals are, what their families are, what their goals with their families are, legitimately take a vested interest in the people that you are in charge of, then you work and pursue the extra time to try to make their goals happen, then a lot of your job becomes monumentally easier. It's not a selfish reason to do that either, you just have to have that mindset of 'I'm going to take care of my people.'

An outstanding example of following heart and passion to serve others, Bailey has continued to follow his heart and passion into a new squadron and into a new aircraft that has so many unknowns.