

I Followed My Heart, Not the Rank: my journey into Army Public Affairs

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3rd Infantry Division Public Affairs



Staff Sgt. Nikki Felton, public affairs non-commissioned officer in charge, 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 3rd Infantry Division, Fort Stewart, Georgia, poses for a photograph Feb. 8, 2017. Felton recently changed career fields and is a graduate of the Basic Public Affairs Course and Intermediate Public Affairs Specialist Course taught at the U.S. Army Defense Information School located at Fort George G. Meade in Maryland. (U.S. Army photo by Lt. Col. Brian Fickel).

It was summer 2015, and I was in the hospital sitting at my best friend's bedside. She just completed having a medical procedure that removed a cancerous tumor.

When she came to, the first thing she asked was how work was going for me.

Unselfishly, she was more concerned with how things were going for me than herself. I

tried several times to shift the attention to her after her harrowing medical procedure. However, I realized that talking about what was going on with me, helped keep her mind off what was going on with her.

I began telling her that it felt like I hit a dead end in my career and that every day at work felt without purpose. I would accomplish task after task for the unit, but none of it seemed to ignite anything within me. My life was mission and not purpose driven.

After spending almost 15 years as a petroleum supply specialist, I no longer had the passion for learning about my craft. Even though I respected and knew first-hand how hard the great men and women in this job field worked, I felt disconnected. While my co-workers would get excited about fueling aircraft, building fuel system supply points and distributing petroleum package products, I would not.

I had also been away from that job for a while. At the time, I worked at the Warrior Transition Battalion at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, as a squad leader. I served in that position for more than two years, and I loved it especially since I could help wounded warriors through their medical transition process.

However, my assignment was coming to an end, and I would be heading back to my original profession. I asked my friend, "How do I lead and motivate Soldiers in a field that I no longer feel passionate about?"

At that moment, Lt. Col. Crystal Boring, a public affairs officer who was assigned to the XVIII Airborne Corps. She so happened to be my best friend's mentor.

Talk about being in the right place at the right time. My best friend knew that I was working towards a degree in public relations and that I aspired to work in the public relations field after retiring from the military.

Again, unselfishly, she strategically began talking about my goals during a conversation with the senior officer. I was caught off guard by the topic, but this was no time to freeze up. It was my chance to capitalize on an opportunity and give her my elevator pitch.

I began to share my aspirations of becoming a crisis management expert such as Judy Smith, whose career inspired the TV series "Scandal."

I took it that Boring was blown away by my passion for the public affairs/ relations career field because she asked me to e-mail her my records and my last five evaluation reports. With a huge smile on my face, I looked over to my best friend, who winked and smiled back at me.

As soon as I returned to work, I immediately sent the documents to Boring. I wanted her to see that I took her counsel and mentorship seriously.

The next day, I was scheduled for an interview with Col. Holly Silkman, the XVIII Airborne Corps public affairs officer, and Sgt. Maj. Tom Clementson, the XVIII Airborne Corps public affairs senior enlisted advisor.

I still remember hearing the colonel ask the sergeant major after the interview,
"Sergeant major, how can we get this Soldier in our field now? She belongs to us."

Thanks to all of these great individuals and leaders encouraging me to join the world of PAO, I finally felt hope for my future! This career change was what I needed.

I could not believe that I was submitting a reclassification packet after 15 years in the military. I was also preparing my records for the sergeant first class selection board which so happened to be my first promotion look in the primary zone. Unfortunately, the timing did not seem to be on my side. I was scheduled to graduate the Public Affairs Specialist Course (BPASC) two months before the board convened, which meant that I would not have enough time to receive an evaluation report substantiating my promotion potential as a senior public affairs NCO. I felt like I was walking away from a possible promotion. I questioned myself so many times. Should I stay in a job I was comfortable in and potentially be promoted, or should I take the risk and follow my heart? The latter won out.

When I found out that the public affairs career management field approved my packet, I was extremely nervous and vulnerable. I was about to begin a new job as a senior staff sergeant, and I lacked the PAO experience. It was scary, but I was eager and motivated to learn.

When I attended the Basic Public Affairs Specialist course at the Defense Information School at Fort Meade, Maryland, I learned the fundamentals of what it takes to be a

U.S. Army public affairs professional. I gained valuable skills in how to write news articles, conduct on-camera interviews, layout and design and how to take professional photographs.

But I knew my education could not stop there. I had to learn more skills that other leaders in my profession already had, and I had to do it fast. I was playing catch-up with my peers, but my spirit and drive never wavered. Sgt. Maj. Tom Clementson and Master Sgt. Joe Thompson, both public affairs senior NCOs, provided a list of advanced courses that I needed to enroll in to learn how to train soldiers in our career field and manage a public affairs section. In addition to taking courses at the Defense Information School, Fort Meade Maryland. I also watched lots of online videos and tutorials.

I completed my first public affairs assignment at 3rd Infantry Division Headquarters and now serve as the public affairs noncommissioned officer in charge of 2nd Infantry Brigade Combat Team, 3rd Infantry Division, at Fort Stewart, Georgia. I am currently responsible for training 2nd IBCT unit public affairs representatives to be photojournalists, coordinate community relation events, manage social media platforms and provide public relation and marketing support to six battalions and a brigade staff.

Imagine that. I get paid to follow soldiers of all professions and backgrounds around with a camera and share their stories with the world. This opportunity is more than just work; this is a passion.

It has been a little over a year since I have changed career fields, and I do not regret the move one bit. Being a public affairs professional has exposed an entirely new world to me. For my first news story, I covered a visit of former Under Secretary of the Army Patrick Murphy when he visited Fort Stewart. I was beyond humbled when he posted a picture of me holding the article I wrote about his visit. His caption read, "Awesome job SSG Felton! Congrats on recently becoming a new Defense Information School Grad!"

Crossing over also inspired me to take charge of my life. I had placed my bachelor degree on hold while attending DINFOS and chose to complete the last course of my associate degree in general studies, only to resume my pursuit of a bachelor's degree after graduation. Now I am two classes away from being a public relations and marketing graduate. I have always been proud to serve my country, but now I do it as an ambassador for one of the best career fields in the U.S. Army.

Not only does this job field offer daily unique opportunities, but also broadening opportunities like attending Georgetown University, Training with Industries, Newhouse School of Public Communications at Syracuse University and working at the Pentagon.

Changing career fields was the very best move I could have made personally and professionally. It took friends to encourage leaders and me to manage talent and recruit me into a field where I could maximize my potential.

This opportunity is a true testament and life lesson I hope to share with others because I believe that it is never too late to take the leap and chase your dreams, especially if you are passionate about it and willing to put in the work.

I could have played it safe and remained a petroleum supply specialist. Instead, I chose a different path. I followed my heart, not the rank.

Soldiers who want to join the Public Affairs Branch should follow the guidelines listed in Military Personnel Message (MILPER) 17-067 below.

Military Personnel Message (MILPER) 17-067

The enlisted reclassification process to Military Occupational Specialty (MOS) 46Q, Public Affairs Specialist, and MOS 46R, Public Affairs Broadcast Specialist, is hereby transitioned from the U.S. Army Public Affairs Center (APAC) to HRC for both the Regular Army (RA) and U.S. Army Reserve Active Guard and Reserve (USAR AGR), effective on the publication date of this message.

The process will no longer require a formal application via APAC; however, unit career counselors must validate the requirements listed in chapters 10-46Q and 10-46R of DA PAM 611-21 (Smartbook) and the Army Training Requirements and Resources System (ATRRS) before submitting the reclassification request to HRC for approval. The requirement to complete two years of English courses is validated by providing official

high school or college transcripts (a diploma cannot be used as a source document to confirm course completion).

The APAC retains the authority to approve or disapprove all requests for exceptions to policy when Soldiers do not meet the requirements to enter CMF 46 as stated in DA Pam 611-21 (Smartbook) and ATRRS. An exception to policy requests, and substantiating documents will be sent to APAC before initiating reclassification action through the unit career counselor.

Soldiers and leaders who have questions about exceptions to policy should contact the Force Development Division, APAC, DSN 622-7281, commercial (301) 677-7281, or via email at usarmy.meade.hqda-ocpa.mbx.apac-force-development@mail.mil.

USAR AGR Soldiers who have questions about the reclassification process should contact the USAR AGR Retention and Reclassification Team via email at usarmy.knox.hrc.mbx.epmd-agr-retention@mail.mil.