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A Broadcast Journalist's Journey from Soldier to Storyteller

By Press S. Vanguard

Prologue: In the world of public affairs, an unspoken rule exists, almost as binding as any official directive: Do not make yourself the story. This tenet serves as a constant reminder that our role is to shine the spotlight on others, never on ourselves. In this domain, turning the camera inward is often viewed as self-aggrandizing—a violation of the professional humility that underpins our craft. Yet, here I stand, poised to recount my narrative, though under a pseudonym. This journey from Soldier to storyteller is not an exercise in self-congratulation but an exploration of transformation. It is about the evolution of a voice that began in the disciplined silence of the

military and found its full expression in the bustling world of broadcast journalism. This story seeks not to place me at the center but to illuminate the path public affairs Soldiers can walk, bridging the gap between the seen and the unseen, and giving voice to experiences that might otherwise go unheard. In this story, I navigate the delicate balance between remaining an observer and becoming a participant, between chronicling stories and being overtly part of them. This challenge is the essence of my odyssey—an odyssey that reveals not just the stories I've told but the profound ways they have told me.

From the rigid structure of military life to the dynamic world of broadcast journalism, my career transition was driven not by chance but by a profound yearning to tell stories that matter. This is my journey from being a military specialist to becoming a voice that conveys the depth of human experience.

The Call to Change

My military tenure as an Army specialist in Iraq involved operating as a .50-caliber gunner, tasked with convoy security. Proud yet unfulfilled by the daily routines of military life, I sensed a different calling as my reenlistment window neared.

The role of a Broadcast Journalist (46R) captivated my imagination. Yet, my ambition was shadowed by personal doubts—chief among them, my battle with dyslexia. My struggles with reading and writing seemed insurmountable obstacles to achieving proficiency in a field that demands excellence in these very areas. Despite these fears, I decided to pursue my passion.

When I approached the career counselor, I was met with disappointing news: the position I desired was not available. Undeterred, I chose to wait, fueled by a resolve to follow my dreams and the steadfast encouragement of my sister April, who believed in my potential more than anyone else.

April would randomly call to check up on me, her voice always filled with an unwavering faith that soothed my anxieties. She was so proud of me no matter where my life took me, offering words of encouragement that echoed in my mind during the toughest of times.

Obstacles and Advocates

The day finally arrived when I was accepted into the broadcast journalism school at Fort Meade, Maryland. The program was split into three rigorous phases: writing, radio, and television. Each presented unique challenges—especially writing, where my dyslexic shortcomings were most pronounced.

My first week was marked by an overconsumption of caffeine, aimed at sharpening my focus. Instead, it heightened my anxiety, making my interactions with classmates awkward and strained. Each spelling or grammar mistake during writing exercises chipped away at my confidence. My performance in the sound

booth was no less challenging. Each correction by the instructor amplified my stress. By the end of the first phase, I did not meet the necessary grades to advance.

Brought before the program's leaders, I was asked to perform a cold reading—an exercise I dreaded. Despite my reservations, I read aloud, clinging to a faint hope that my efforts would be enough. The lead professor, having observed my relentless morning practice, acknowledged my hard work. His recognition of my dedication led to an unexpected offer: a second chance to prove myself.

A Journey of Perseverance

This second chance was both a gift and a gauntlet. I had to confront and overcome my fears, not merely to succeed but to survive in the program. I engaged with the material on a deeper level, embracing every piece of feedback as an opportunity to learn.

With each day, my skills sharpened, and my confidence grew. By the time I reentered the first phase, I was a different student. I preemptively addressed mistakes, and my improved performance began to earn not just passing marks but genuine praise from my instructors.

Triumph and Tragedy

As I began to establish myself in my new career, I embarked on projects that allowed me to delve deep into the stories I reported. My first significant piece—a video feature on a boxer's journey of redemption—mirrored my struggles and eventual victory. This feature won first place in the prestigious Keith L. Ware competition, a validation of my capabilities and a milestone in my career. The following year, I aimed higher and was named the 2014 Army Broadcast Journalist of the Year.

During this time of professional success, a sudden buzz from my phone brought a sharp contrast. It was a message from my niece: "Call me, it's urgent."

I hesitated, but the messages persisted, each one escalating my anxiety. Deciding it could no longer wait, I replied, asking my niece to just tell me what was wrong. The response came back heavy and cold: "April is dead."

April, my older sister and greatest supporter, had unexpectedly passed away under tragic circumstances. My niece's words felt unreal, as if they belonged to someone else's story, not mine.

The news plunged me into a surreal mix of emotions.



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As I traveled to April's funeral, I grappled with the profound sadness of her absence, which was nearly paralyzing. During the flight, my grief found its expression through my pen as I wrote what I intended as a tribute to her life, which, in a twist of fate, became her eulogy.

Addressing the mourners, I stood not just as her brother but as a storyteller, tasked with honoring her memory through words. The weight of this responsibility, combined with my grief, made this one of the most challenging stories I ever had to tell. The process of writing her eulogy, while cathartic, was also a stark reminder of the brutal finality of loss. It was during these moments of deep sorrow that I truly understood the power of storytelling—it not only captures joy and success but also grapples with despair and tragedy.

Returning from the funeral, I received news that brought a bittersweet twist to my emotional journey. I had won the Department of Defense Broadcast Journalist of the Year award.

This honor, encompassing all branches of the military, was a profound validation of my work and my sister's belief in me, yet it was tinged with the sadness of not

being able to share it with April. Her encouragement had been a driving force in reaching this pinnacle, and this accolade was as much hers as it was mine.

Legacy and Leadership

Now, serving as a chief public affairs NCO in charge (NCOIC) in a strategic unit, I mentor young Soldiers, sharing my experiences and illustrating the profound significance of their own stories.

My journey from the frontlines to the newsroom has been marked by both challenges and triumphs, each step reinforcing the importance of resilience, dedication, and the profound impact of sharing meaningful stories.

It is a privilege to lead in such a capacity, ensuring our service members' stories are told with the accuracy, empathy, and insight they deserve. Positioned at the junction of military service and media, I am committed to my mission to communicate, educate, and inspire.

By sharing my story, I hope to move others to embrace their challenges and transform them into opportunities for growth and achievement, telling the stories that matter most. ■



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