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Recommended Citation

Georgia Southern University, "Newsroom" (2016). *Newsroom*. 607.
<https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/newsroom/607>

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Wherever life takes you

JUNE 30, 2016



Justin L. Williams never expected six years in the U.S. Army and a 1,000 foot jump from a plane to land him where he is today – pursuing a second degree at Georgia Southern University through the help of the University’s Wounded Eagle Fund.

A native of Cordele, Georgia, Williams joined the Army as an E-1, or a buck private. His first duty station was at the former Warner Barracks in Bamberg, Germany, with the 173rd Airborne Brigade Combat team. With this team, he deployed to Afghanistan before heading to Fort Bragg in North Carolina and Iraq with the 82nd Airborne Division.

“From my deployment experience, I really have a great appreciation now for the freedoms we have in America,” said Williams. “There’s a lot of things that we do here, not even thinking about, that you wouldn’t dream of doing other places in the world.”

It is no surprise that his military career would teach him new skills, but just how beneficial they would prove in the future was unexpected.

“I learned a ridiculous amount about hard work and discipline,” Williams emphasized.

A military career was going to be a major part of his life. He wanted to stay in the Army and become a warrant officer, then have a career in politics. But that all changed one day in December 2011.

While at Fort Bragg, he was part of a training exercise that entailed a "Hollywood" jump, one that is not particularly high and jumpers only carry a parachute. Williams recalled it was supposed to be "one of the good ones."

"We're all like 'yeah, it's going to be easy, you know, it's nothing.'"

This jump resulted in a severely injured leg for Williams. Hard work and discipline were exactly what he needed during the following year-long recovery from his injuries. After six months with his leg in a cast, he spent several more months learning to walk again. He persevered with his military assignment before concluding his body just couldn't handle it anymore.

Georgia Southern became the next place for Williams to soar. He enrolled in Fall 2013 as a 25-year-old freshman. Those lessons in hard work and discipline he learned while in the service helped him graduate ahead of schedule in December 2015 and receive a bachelor's degree with a major in political science and a minor in philosophy.

"Even when it was time for me to graduate, I knew they had a program for me so I decided to stay because I really like Georgia Southern," said Williams. "It's in a nice place, it reminds me of my hometown, but overall I fell in love with the campus when I came here."

Williams is currently pursuing his master's in public administration at the University, a goal that wouldn't have been possible without financial assistance from a pivotal scholarship fund at Georgia Southern.

He is the 2016 recipient of the [Wounded Eagle Fund](#), a scholarship created to help wounded veterans who have transitioned from soldiers to students to pursue their dreams of a college education. Georgia Southern has been named among the most military-friendly campuses in the nation by both G.I. Jobs magazine and Military Advanced Education's Guide to Military Friendly Colleges and Universities. Even still, for veterans, adjusting to a university environment after a career in the military can be difficult enough, but combined with the financial strains of an education, the transition can become extremely challenging.

"I think it's awesome that the family who started the scholarship feels something like this is necessary because a lot of people aren't aware that there are still financial issues that veterans have even with what the government gives us," said a grateful Williams.

The scholarship ensures that students who are wounded veterans and have risked their lives for our freedoms will have the opportunity to receive a stipend to offset the costs the G.I. Bill will not cover.

This financial assistance helps to ensure the successful adjustment of these heroes and their future happiness and productivity.

"It's a huge, huge thing for me because I wasn't sure if I'd be able to stay in the program and the scholarship is definitely assisting me in finishing," said Williams.



Not only does Williams consider his college education among his greatest accomplishments, he also takes pride in the work he's done with the Student Veterans Association and helping to strengthen the Military and Veteran Student Center at Georgia Southern. He has built a large network of other students, including military and veteran students he has met through the Student Veterans Association, and other University

connections. Using his experiences to assist others, he currently serves as a military advocate coordinator connecting military and veteran students with each other and resources.

"There was a teamwork aspect to it that really helped me get where I am now," he added.

After graduation in December 2017, he hopes to begin his career in city management. As for his thoughts on the next degree he'll receive, "I realize that life doesn't always keep you where you want. Wherever it takes you is where it takes you."