

South Dakota National Guard

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Dream of flying, serving others inspire Soldiers to become pilots

By Spc. Kristin Lichius – 129th Mobile Public Affairs Detachment

RAPID CITY, S.D. – South Dakota Army National Guard Chief Warrant Officer 2 Damon Lappe knew from an early age that he wanted to be a pilot. Growing up, he dreamed of attending the Air Force Academy to fly the planes he had seen in the skies over Ellsworth Air Force Base.

Then one day, when he was 12 years old, Lappe saw several HH-60M Black Hawk helicopters fly over his house. The whirring of the blades, the stealthy shadows that swept across the ground and the sudden wind stirred his determination, and he decided he was going to do whatever it took to become a Black Hawk pilot.

“I knew I wanted to fly,” said Lappe. “I always dreamed of being like Tom Cruise in “Top Gun.”

Lappe wasn't the only one who was enchanted by the idea of becoming a pilot.

Capt. Brittany Pearson, who was already enlisted in the SDARNG, was approached by a Reserve Officer Training Corps recruiter. For Pearson, one conversation with an aviation officer changed her life and planted the seed that started her dream of becoming a pilot.

Attending the ROTC program in college is one way to start the path to becoming a South Dakota Army National Guard pilot. Lappe chose another path and attended Warrant Officer Candidate School.

Once graduated, both Pearson and Lappe attended Army Aviation School to specialize in flying the Black Hawks of the Rapid City-based Company C, 1st Battalion, 189th Aviation Regiment.

The 189th's primary mission is to provide aerial medical evacuation during natural disasters or emergency operations and to support U.S. military personnel in a theater of war or during peacekeeping operations.

Pearson and Lappe said the unit is looking for more Soldiers for their pilot program and currently has several openings for qualified applicants.

“The job requires us to have a vast amount of knowledge,” said Pearson. “It's more than just knowing how to control the helicopter. You have to know about aerodynamics and the aircraft itself, different systems, flight rules, emergency procedures and much more.”

In order to attend Army Aviation School, applicants must meet a rigorous list of requirements in order to apply. An applicant considering becoming an aviator must take several tests, including the Selection Instrument for Flight Training test, a flight physical examination, and achieve a high enough score on the Armed Forces Vocational Aptitude Battery.

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“When you think about a pilot, [such as] Tom Cruise in “Top Gun” – the movies never show the amount of studying, reading, hard work he would have had to do to obtain that skill,” said Lappe. “It’s an incredibly demanding job.”

After almost 2 years of intense training, Pearson and Lappe were finally ready to own the sky.

“Getting out and flying over the badlands, seeing the beautiful country from the cockpit is unlike anything else you’ve ever experienced,” said Lappe.

Although flying is their passion, both Pearson and Lappe also have demanding civilian careers.

Lappe works as a police officer for the Rapid City Police Department. When he’s not fighting crime, Lappe has to ensure he makes time to meet his flight hour requirements. Between the long hours at the department and even longer flight hours, Lappe spends as much time as he can with his wife and two kids.

During her time away from the flight line, Pearson works as a 7th grade school teacher. She also commits her time to coaching various middle school sports including basketball and volleyball. She spends long hours preparing lesson plans and game plays in order to make time to get her flight hours in every other week.

“My students see that I can pursue my dreams and goals in different areas, and I feel like I am a good role model to them in that aspect,” said Pearson.

For the 189th pilots, flying isn’t just about accomplishing a dream. The aviators play an important role serving the state of South Dakota and the nation.

Often times, the Black Hawk crews are called in by the state to rescue stranded or wounded hikers. The Black Hawks are also able to fly, carrying loads of water to provide fire suppression support when forest fires break out over the Black Hills.

“It’s a surreal moment,” said Pearson. “You look around you, and there’s other aircraft flying by and people constantly talking on the radios. It’s like working in a well-oiled machine.”

The flight crews use the same skills they use to rescue hikers to rescue wounded service members in battle.

“We are medevac, and we are there to save people’s lives,” said Pearson. “When that radio goes off, you get chills and it’s time. You know that you’re with the best crew, and you’re going to do whatever it takes to get your patients home.”

Saving lives is what the 189th pilots do. It took innumerable hours, incredible amount of hard work and dedication, and many sacrifices along the way, but in the end they accomplished their dreams of becoming pilots.

Whether they are out serving the community in their civilian roles, in uniform serving the state, or overseas serving the country, the 189th pilots like Pearson and Lappe are making a difference in peoples’ lives wherever they go.



161105-Z-BP726-064: U.S. Army Chief Warrant Officer 2 Damon Lappe and Capt. Brittany Pearson, with Company C, 1st Battalion, 189th Aviation Regiment, South Dakota Army National Guard, conduct preflight checks in a HH-60M Black Hawk helicopter at the Army Aviation Support Facility in Rapid City, S.D., Nov. 5, 2016. Pearson and Lappe made their dream of flying a reality by serving in the SDARNG. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by Spc. Kristin Lichius)



161105-Z-BP726-030: U.S. Army Capt. Brittany Pearson and Chief Warrant Officer 2 Damon Lappe are HH-60M Black Hawk helicopter pilots with Company C, 1st Battalion, 189th Aviation Regiment, South Dakota Army National Guard, at the Army Aviation Support Facility in Rapid City, S.D., Nov. 5, 2016. Pearson and Lappe made their dream of flying a reality by serving in the SDARNG. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by Spc. Kristin Lichius)



161105-Z-RO774-070: U.S. Army Capt. Brittany Pearson and Chief Warrant Officer 2 Damon Lappe are HH-60M Black Hawk helicopter pilots with Company C, 1st Battalion, 189th Aviation Regiment, South Dakota Army National Guard, at the Army Aviation Support Facility in Rapid City, S.D., Nov. 5, 2016. Pearson and Lappe made their dream of flying a reality by serving in the SDARNG. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by Spc. Rebecca Glidden)



161105-Z-BP726-080: U.S. Army Capt. Brittany Pearson and Chief Warrant Officer 2 Damon Lappe are HH-60M Black Hawk helicopter pilots with Company C, 1st Battalion, 189th Aviation Regiment, South Dakota Army National Guard, at the Army Aviation Support Facility in Rapid City, S.D., Nov. 5, 2016. Pearson and Lappe made their dream of flying a reality by serving in the SDARNG. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by Spc. Kristin Lichius)

FOR MORE INFORMATION: Please contact Maj. Anthony Deiss at (605) 737-6721 or cell (605) 431-8753, or e-mail ng.sd.sdarng.list.pao@mail.mil