

By Joe Henderson

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*(This is the first of a two-part series on the career of retired Colonel Ben Schill, a 1996 Oil City High School graduate)*

As a young man growing up in Oil City, Ben Schill hadn't given specific thought to becoming a pilot.

But, that changed for the 1996 Oil City High School graduate during one of the frequent times he played basketball with his best friend, Rocky Noble, during a summer afternoon between his sophomore and junior years of high school.

"The short answer is no," Schill said when asked if it was always his dream to become a pilot in an interview with the newspaper over the phone. "While playing basketball, Rocky said 'I think I'm going to try and go be a pilot,' and I thought 'What? I never thought about that, but if he can do it, maybe I can do it.' Then I started to think about it in earnest. Our basketball coach, Dan Fry, had a son (Tom Fry, OCHS Class of 1990) attend the Air Force Academy, so that made it seem possible that I could go there, too, and that I might make it in."

With help from coach Fry, Schill was able to get into the Air Force Academy, graduating in 2000 with a degree in Environmental Engineering before beginning his journey to become a pilot.

“Obviously, I had to put in the work once I got there, but a huge amount of credit goes to Dan Fry for getting me into the Air Force Academy,” Schill said. “I’m proof that those coaches and teachers who get in your corner, not just telling you that you might consider going to do something, but actually telling you that you could do it, and who tell you ‘you have what it takes’, can make a big difference in a young man’s life.”

After completing Specialized Undergraduate Pilot Training in 2001 and the F-16 Basic Course in 2002, Schill went on to serve as a fighter pilot in the United States Air Force and the Texas Air National Guard, retiring in early May in the rank of Colonel after more than 25 years of service, including 152 combat missions over the skies of Iraq and Afghanistan.

Schill, who lives in Texas with his wife and five children, flew the F-16 for his entire career, logging more than 3,300 hours in the fighter jet, earning the Meritorious Service Medal with three oak leaf clusters, Air Medal with four oak leaf clusters, the Aerial Achievement Medal as well as multiple combat expeditionary medals and awards.

“When I got to the Air Force Academy, I thought ‘I’m here so I’m going to study something that will be useful to me, even if I can’t become a pilot.’ I did that with engineering, and was fortunate that when graduation and commissioning neared, there was a spot for me to go attend pilot training,” Schill said. “So, I just kept putting one foot in front of the other to try and get to be a pilot, and it worked out. I didn’t think of it as a lifelong dream, but I thought it would be a real cool thing to do. It was something I never fixated on, but I if I kept making the right decisions, it was something I might have the opportunity to do.”

Before entering the military, Schill was a four-year starter for the Oil City boys basketball team, totaling 1,130 career points to become the Oilers' all-time leading scorer, and he is still the only boy to reach 1,000 career points all in an Oiler uniform. He also finished with more than 700 career rebounds.

"I really wanted to play sports in college, but what many don't realize is that the people who play sports in college are exceptional, exceptional athletes. Coach Fry provided immense help in getting me looks for college, and there were some places I probably could have gone and contributed," Schill said. "But, the Air Force Academy was a way for me to go to college for free. I also knew I needed structure in college, so going to military school would be something that would solve all of that. So, I would get to go for free, it was structured, I could work towards becoming a pilot, and I could get a chance to play basketball there."

As it turns out, basketball at the next level wasn't in the cards for Schill, but the Air Force Academy turned out to be just what he needed.

"I got a lot more out of the Air Force than the Air Force got out of me," he said. "It's the adventure of the tasks, the adventure of the people you meet and the type of team work that you get to be apart of. It is really special."

However, attending the Air Force Academy wasn't easy for Schill, who considered himself to be an average student. But, he was willing to ask for help from his teachers in high school and his professors in college, and they were willing to provide the help he needed.

“My high school teachers at Oil City were a huge blessing to me. I was a fine student, but I wasn’t a straight A student. I wasn’t a perfect academic kid. My teachers were so patient and they helped me with extra instruction,” Schill said. “Mr. Husband, my pre-Calculus teacher, spent time with me to get me where I needed to be in math because he knew I wanted to go to the Air Force and study engineering. He gave me that extra instruction I needed.”

In college, subjects like Structural Engineering, Fluid Dynamics, Thermodynamics, Physics, Material Science and three Calculus courses proved to be difficult for Schill, but his professors were willing to help him there as well.

“Those courses are perhaps a little more difficult at the Air Force than at some other schools in some ways, but my instructors in college helped me when I asked them for help,” he continued. “It was academically difficult for me to get through the Academy, but credit to my OCHS teachers and my college professors, they were an absolutely huge blessing.”

It was at the Air Force Academy that Schill started to think about becoming a fighter pilot.

“When you are at the Air Force Academy, you learn about all the different types of aviation,” he said. “In the Air Force you can go fly helicopters, big cargo planes, smaller types of airplanes or you can fly fighter jets. You sort of keep moving toward one of those goals without closing any of those other doors at the same time, and that’s how it kind of manifested for me.”

After graduating from the Air force Academy and being commissioned as a Lieutenant, Schill took the first step in pilot training by getting his pilot license at a small civilian flight school in Colorado Springs, training in a Cessna 172.

But, he ran into a doubter with his civilian instructor in his goal to becoming a fighter pilot.

“The guy who gave me my first FAA checkride said ‘I don’t think you’re going to be fighter pilot material.’ I don’t know what he made that judgement on, but I thought that sounds like a challenge in some respect,” Schill said. “So just like in sports, if somebody would tell me, ‘I don’t think you can do that,’ I would think, ‘Alright. I’m going to give it a shot and see if I can.’”

Despite the review from his civilian flight instructor, Schill earned his pilot license and began the journey to become an F-16 fighter pilot.

Schill’s journey began to get more intense in Undergraduate Pilot Training at Columbus Air Force Base in Mississippi, where he spent a year transitioning from flying the Cessna 172 to a training in the Cessna T-37 and the the Northrop Grumman T-38.

“Air Force training is merit-based. Pilots choose their aircraft based upon their performance relative to their peers, so if you perform well in the Air Force training programs, you are going to get what you want as long as it’s available,” Schill said.

“So, when I went through pilot training, I just kept doing my best. I wasn’t the best student in my class, but I think I had a good attitude, and I think I had decent hands to fly the trainer aircraft that I flew. I think my commanders and instructors in pilot training

saw that I performed well under pressure, and they kept giving me the opportunity to continue on that fighter aviation track.”

“Finishing pilot training, we completed our ‘dream sheets’, choosing between F-15, F-15E, the A-10 and the F-16. The F16 was my No. 1 choice,” Schill continued. “It’s all competitive: Ground school, T-37, and then T-38 flying training. I had great instructors and classmates and was completely thrilled to get F-16s.”

After completing Undergraduate Pilot Training and earning his USAF Pilot Wings, Schill’s training got even more intense as he moved on to Introduction to Fighter Fundamentals at Moody Air Force Base, Georgia, in January of 2002.

“Introduction to Fighter Fundamentals is a six-week intensive course where they introduce you to how fighter flying works, but you’re still flying in a T-38. You already know the airplane, but they are increasing your vocabulary. ‘This is what dogfighting is going to look like when you get to the F16. This is what some of the formation maneuvers are going to look like and this is some of the etiquette,” Schill said. “This was basically a prep school for fighter training. It was pretty eye-opening and it was pretty intense. At the same time, I met my future wife, so it was an exciting time.”

After graduating from Introduction to Fighter Fundamentals, Schill was getting closer to reaching his goal of flying the F-16.

He then moved on to the F-16 Basic Course at Luke Air Force Base in Arizona where he was 90 percent of the way to becoming an F-16 Wingman.

“The F16 Basic Course was a nine-month program where we learned how to become an F16 Wingman. From when I left high school to the end of this program, it was a six-and-a-half-year road,” Schill said. “During that course in Arizona, I learned how to fly the F-16 in the daytime and nighttime. I learned about dogfighting, air-to-air long- and medium-range tactics, night vision goggles, and air to ground attacks, dropping bombs in various scenarios, including close air support to ground forces.

“We learned to fight our way into a target and fight our way back out, which means flying into enemy territory, getting shot at, defending yourself, dropping your bombs onto a target and fighting your way back out in a single-seat, single-engine aircraft flying anywhere from 500 feet above the ground to over 40,000 feet at supersonic speeds,” he continued. “It was an incredible time of growth. The F16 was a dream to fly, the instructors were incredible and the training there was wonderful. The Air Force poured a tremendous amount of resources into a gang of about 10 of us, some of whom are still friends of mine today. It was nine straight months of eating, breathing, sleeping and training in aviation, and it was incredible.”

Having dedicated so much of himself to get through pilot training, Schill was proud of what he accomplished.

“I made a lot of sacrifices and it was challenging for me, but I was proud of my effort, he said. “It was one of the first times in my life where I felt I applied myself and I didn’t shortchange my opportunities by being lazy or not doing my best. It was hard for me, but the hard work paid off.”