

By Joe Henderson

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

Having spent more than six years attending the Air Force Academy and then graduating the F-16 Basic Course in the Autumn of 2002, Oil City High School graduate and newly-minted First Lieutenant Ben Schill received his first combat unit assignment with the 80th Fighter Squadron at Kunsan Air Base, in South Korea.

Schill had to make the journey alone as he was not allowed to take his fiancée, Stacey, along with him, so they decided to get married before his year-long assignment.

“I was engaged to my girlfriend as I was graduating from the F-16 course in Arizona, and then I got assigned to Korea,” Schill said. “Because it’s so remote there, you’re not allowed to take a girlfriend or spouse with you, you have to go on your own, so we decided to get married and be fully committed to one another as I started that year-long tour.”

With tensions around the world high following the deadly terrorist attacks in New York City and Washington D.C. just over a year before, being stationed in South Korea was an eye-opening experience for Schill.

“When you land at Kunsan, there are fighter jets all over the ramp and parked in hardened aircraft shelters. There are Patriot missile batteries facing north and the base

is surrounded by barb wire, concertina wire and probably booby traps,” Schill said. “A war with the North could kick off at any moment, and I thought ‘this is pretty serious.’ It was a jarring kind of wake-up call and I would think about the amount of enemy weaponry that would be used and how the South Koreans would be attacked. It was very sobering and it really opened my eyes as to what my role was in our national defense strategy in my first year there.”

After finishing out his assignment, Schill was finally able to live in the same house with his wife as he got stationed with the 522nd Fighter Squadron at Cannon Air Force Base, New Mexico. During that time, he went from F-16 Wingman to F-16 Flight Lead to F-16 Instructor Pilot. He also was promoted to Captain in May of 2004.

In July of 2006, he got another combat unit assignment with the 23rd Fighter Squadron in Spangdahlem Air Base, Germany, where he became an Evaluator Pilot before being accepted into the Air Force Weapons Instructor Course at Nellis Air Force Base, Nevada, in 2007.

“The Weapons School for the Air Force is exactly the same thing as the Top Gun program for the Navy. It has the same qualifications and structures, but it was much more intense and complex than the F-16 Basic Course,” Schill said. “It was six straight months of high-level learning of operational and tactical problem solving that very few people get to do, with extraordinarily long days. We went at it 16 hours a day and when we were finished, we went to bed exhausted and had to do it all over again the next day. But, it was an incredible and wonderful experience.”

After completing the program and becoming a Weapons Officer, Schill went back to Germany before being deployed to Iraq as his squadron's Chief Instructor Pilot in 2008. After spending five months in Iraq, he went back to Germany before serving in Iraq again in 2009. His final deployment was in 2018, when he volunteered to serve with a unit from Oklahoma in Afghanistan for four months.

"Flying over Iraq and Afghanistan by and large was not dangerous because we could fly with impunity. The real danger came when you had to go do something that was out of the ordinary," Schill said. "For most of the 152 missions I flew, it was hours and hours of boredom followed by seconds of sheer terror. When you're doing your job right, you are very bored. When something changes or the enemy does something you didn't predict or something you didn't anticipate, then things get dangerous much more quickly. "I was pretty lucky that the vast majority of my combat missions went by the script. There were only four or five of them that I can recall where I was feeling a lot of pressure and actually had a sense of danger."

But one mission in particular did stick out for Schill from his time in Afghanistan.

"One of the scariest times for me in the F-16 was not when I was getting shot at, but when I was trying to fly across Afghanistan alone to drop weapons. I was sent to defend a group of friendlies who were taking gunfire on the ground, and there were a lot of thunderstorms between us," Schill said. "One of the most dangerous things when flying in an aircraft is a thunderstorm. So, I've got about an hour-and-a-half flight through these thunderstorms and the airplane is getting lit up by all the static electricity in the lightning going on around me. It was a very threatening and harrowing

experience, and once I got done with that mission, it was one of the only times in my life where I felt the desire to kiss the ground.”

But, Schill isn't just depending on his own skills when flying an aircraft, he's also trusting in a team that helps him keep his plane in the air.

“Aviation in general can be dangerous, but fighter aviation is especially dangerous,” Schill said. “When you are in the cockpit, you are sitting on the shoulders of about 500 people who are technical experts that make the airplane run, keep the computer systems working and making sure the fuel that got pumped into the aircraft is not contaminated, and so on. “So, there is a tremendous amount of trust in that team.”

In 2010, Schill, now a Major, received an assignment back to Nellis AFB, Nevada, as part of the Test and Evaluation Squadron, where his career took a sudden turn.

“I became an Operational Test Pilot at Nellis AFB, and during my two years, a buddy of mine was killed in a F-16 crash. It was a tragic event at a very formative crossroads of my career,” he said. “When my buddy was killed, I thought ‘I don't want to run this hard and hot all the time. I need to do something that takes some of the intensity of my life down’ because I wanted to be a good father and have a strong marriage. So, I got out of the Regular Air Force, took a full-time assignment with the Air National Guard in San Antonio, Texas.”

Schill spent the rest of his career with the 149th Fighter Wing of the Texas Air National Guard, serving as Weapons Officer, Training Chief, Long Range Programmer, Chief of Safety, Operations Support Squadron Commander, Operations Group Commander,

and finally as the Deputy Wing Commander. He was promoted to Lieutenant Colonel in 2017 and then Colonel in 2022.

Schill credits growing up in Venango County as a big reason for his success in his career and in his life.

“My family didn’t have a lot of money by any means, but I had a mom and dad who loved me a lot and gave me every opportunity they could afford in so many ways. I also received a lot of love and support from neighbors, teachers and friends, so when I look back at my career, I think I was applying a lot of what I’d learned as a kid back home,” Schill said. “You don’t get what you want in life instantaneously. You have to put one foot in front of the other, and when you do that over time, good things are going to start falling your way. There are going to be bumps in the road, though, and I’ve plenty of bumps in my road. I am incredibly blessed to have grown up there. I got my fair share of hard knocks when I was there and it made me a lot tougher.”

As good as Schill was on the basketball court, he wasn’t the only great player in the family as his dad, Tony, scored 956 career points at Venango Christian High School while his older brother, Jay, finished with 1,573 career points with 1,318 of those points coming in three seasons for VC and 255 in his senior year with the Oilers, according to former The Derrick sports editor Penny Weichel.

“My dad was a dominant basketball player at VC and they didn’t have a three-point line back then. He would have scored 1,000 points but an injury and the nature of the game made it impossible. My brother Jay was the most skilled and versatile and scorer of all of us as, particularly as shooter. He was incredible. When he came back from his first

year playing college basketball, he had an elevated jump shot that was unstoppable,” Ben Schill said. “I was really proud of the teammates and coaches that I had. We just wanted to win, and what an incredible run we had. I’m sure someone will come along and break my scoring record. I’m hoping it happens, and sooner rather than later.”

After Schill retired in May, his family and friends got together for a retirement party at his home. It seems only fitting that his former basketball coach, Dan Fry, was in attendance.

“I had a great father. He loved all of his kids and he loved me well. But, I singled out Dan Fry in front of my friends and family at my retirement. I told him ‘I think every son needs to hear from an adult male who is not his father the solid messages that reinforce what his dad is saying to him’ and tells him ‘I think you have what it takes to do something with your life’ and ‘you can do it.’ That’s what Dan Fry did for me,” Schill said. “He verbalized it to me, but he also asked it of me as a coach by holding me accountable. Dan was a huge blessing to me and he still is today, and I hope I can pay it forward similarly.”

Schill’s time in the military may have come to an end, but his journey in life is far from over.

“When I was 18 and I left home, I knew that I was starting an adventure, and I was excited to start it. But it’s not over,” he said. “My wife and I are going to go on more adventures. We’ll help our own kids make good decisions in life. I’m also planning to be involved with whatever community that I’m in, to help kids that are in the same situation I was in to get on the right path.”

