Who Am I, and Why Do I Want to Talk to You?

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Please note: This transcript has been edited for clarity.

Hi, this is Tom Galvin. And in this episode, I introduce my new series, *Reflections on Management*. I know that several of you who are listeners of the main *Talking About Organizations* podcast have heard me provide little dibs and drabs about who I am and where I fit in the grand scheme of things. But I thought it might be worthwhile to take just a few minutes of of time to tell you a little bit more about myself in a holistic sense to help set the expectations of what I hope to accomplish through this separate podcast.

My first thought is to kind of start more towards the end of my story. That is, how did I wind up going into a doctoral program, especially given that I did so I began at my 27th year of military service. I was already a colonel for four years, not well into my 50s. Not exactly your typical doctoral candidate. And as it turns out, I was hardly alone. Matter of fact, it was in that program that I met my podcast mate, Ralph Soule. we both joined a program that actually kind of catered to those of us who were, shall we say, a bit more experienced going into our doctoral program. And it included folks who really didn't have a full grounded educational background in management studies.

So I kind of went into this mostly because I had gained more than two and a half decades of significant experience in organizational learning, organizational leadership, culture change, all of the things that are pillars of management science and organization theory without actually having the schooling. And so as I approached this middle life phase of my life, I started to gain interest in trying to make sense of all of the experiences that I had up to this point. And this was really the best way to do it was just to get your head into the game and understand the fundamental theories and the contemporary theories of how organizations work. So then I can decide for myself what was the value of the experiences. And also because of my position in a high level military educational institution, my role there is to groom the next generations of senior leaders. And if if I was to be more effective in teaching them, it was best that I know more about how organizations work, at least from the science and from the academic side of things.

So the making sense of my own experiences would turn into lessons that I can impart on others. And so that's kind of where I wound up.

Now, how did I get there? What's what are these experiences that I am talking about and that I'm going to be sharing with you on a weekly basis in the course of these sessions?

My original background was in computer science. That was my interest when I was in high school.

I got involved in computers and this was back in the days when floppy disks were eight inches wide and of course, only contained maybe about 256 bytes of data. I don't remember how much they carried, but it wasn't much and the systems were slow. The memory was like about four kilobytes. You can't imagine -- what would you do with four kilobytes nowadays? The answer is nothing. But anyway, I was able to get involved in some very, very low level programming and I followed that.

I was accepted, oddly enough, in the to the Carnegie Mellon University out in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, the subject of a whole series of podcasts on the main show devoted to the business school side of things. Well, I wasn't involved in the business school. I was on the technical side. Our buildings were across from the business school. And I basically hunkered down and learned basically programming.

It was programming that I thought was going to be my career in the military. The military at the time when I joined was basically getting really into the personal computing revolution in a big way. They recognized that computers were going to become a big part of how information was going to flow around a battlefield of the future. This was in the mid to late 1980s. So folks like me who had the technical background were heavily recruited. I had to basically cut my teeth in the standard common leadership positions of platoon leader and company commander, which all young officers in the army are required to go through.

But after that, once I satisfied those requirements. I then followed on to graduate school at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterrey, California, where I pursued a master of science in computer science and artificial intelligence.

Subsequently, my utilization tour from that actually was my first tour in Carlisle Barracks in Pennsylvania. Carlisle Barracks is located about two and a half hours west of Philadelphia, kind of in rural Pennsylvania, not too far away from Hershey, home of the famous Milton Hershey and the Hershey Chocolate Company. But Carlisle itself is kind of a small city, about 18000 people. It's probably bigger now, but it was at the time kind of small and not growing very much. In the mid 1990s, the Army War College was largely just the college itself and a couple of small institutes.

I joined one of the newest organizations at the War College as an artificial intelligence specialist in a building that was it was known as the Center for Strategic Leadership.

And its primary mission was wargaming and simulations. And so I was assigned to apply my artificial intelligence craft to the simulations that they ran for the students, the war college students, the future colonels and general officers of the of the U.S. military, along with international fellows from countries from all over the world.

So then after serving in the War College, those for about three years, I went overseas and literally spent 13 of the next 14 years overseas between the Middle East and several tours in Europe. And it was during that time where I kind of had to go through a little bit of a transition because there wasn't a place for artificial intelligence specialists to progress at that time. As a matter of fact, it was a specialty field when I entered it. By the time I left the War College the first time, the specialty field was already drying up. And the move was to take all of the in-house computer science capability and outsource it. So I was somewhat at a transition point looking to try to get back into the the standard tactical realm, still thinking that I had a place in the technical fields within the

military. And that's when at some point as a junior major, a new major, about 10 to 12 years of service, that I was actually grabbed more or less and told that I needed to go work at a three star general's front office This was a shock because I had spent the first part of my whole career to that point really not wanting to be close to the flagpole. I was perfectly content to work in my technical field, my areas of expertise. And so my enthusiasm was not initially all that great. Well, it turned out very well for me. And from there, I was then reassigned to a similar office at a four-star headquarters. Also these two headquarters were both in Germany. So I was reassigned to a four-star headquarters, whereas working again in the front office as a special projects officer.

And I think the best way to describe it, just real briefly, is that because I had a high technical degree and I had a lot of experience in very complex matters, shall we say, I was more or less labeled a "smart guy." And so that's how I wound up being tabbed as a special projects officer. And I had the chance to pursue some projects, which I can't actually discuss much in detail. But they were basically personally for the commanders who I served. And there is when I started to come to grips with the complexity of organizational life at the high levels, because that assignment turned into another similar assignment, turned into another similar assignment.

Eleven years in total, I served directly as a personal assistant to a three or a four star general officer who was commanding an organization some 50 to 100 thousand people. And there was military, civilians, contractors. It was large geographic areas they were responsible for. It included the commander of the stabilization force in Bosnia. It included the commander of the United States Army, Europe and 7th Army. It included the U.S. European Command. And for three and a half years, I served during the stand up of the U.S. Africa Command. A story about which I introduced in one of the Talking About Organizations Podcasts. So with all of that experience there, a lot of things happened. I was involved in a lot of change, a lot of changes in culture, a lot of transformations.

But again, I still did not have any background in management, science or organization theory. You might say that I learned some hard lessons on the job. When in retrospect, boy, do I actually wish I had followed the humanities rather than the hard sciences. But, you know, sometimes life turns out that way.

So then by the time I was finally done with that phase and it was 2011, that's when I returned to the War College in order to join the faculty and become a instructor. That was basically my terminal assignment -- my final assignment as a active duty officer. And it was kind of like, well, I have all this experience, I have all this knowledge and I have all of these incredible stories of things that I was involved with at the high levels, not only within the organizations that I was personally serving in, but a lot of other large, large organizations which I was dealing with, Department of State, the country teams and the ambassadors, other U.S. government agencies, international organizations, intergovernmental organizations and and also federal, state, mostly federal and state level agencies within the U.S. government.

So with all these stories, it basically was why I decided to join the Talking About Organizations podcast in the first place. When Ralph extended an invitation to me, the podcasts have been going on for a season. It sounded like a wonderful way for, you know, just being able to stay kind of

current, set the fast pace of academic life aside and try to get back to the basics of just having a good dialogue about some really great readings.

But as I started to get into that, I started to develop these sidecasts. And you've I think I did a total of four so far in the main broadcast in which I started to find some comfort in presenting my own stories of all of these experiences and do it kind of separately and make it its own story associated with what I've learned in organization, theory and management science.

So that's kind of what I hope you come to expect in the program. I'm going to give you some stories. Some of them are going to be rich in detail, and some of them, I'm afraid, are going to have to be intentionally vague. You know, I have to I have to be respectful to the organizations I was serving in. And also, there are just simply some things for various reasons that I can't discuss in detail.

But enough of the story to illuminate something that's kind of, I think, important in the practice of organization theory and in the practice of management science that perhaps could use some renewed attention, additional research, illuminate some new ideas about how to help other practitioners engage in the complex, dynamic and highly competitive world to which they belong.

And so, this first season is going to be this episode zero and ten full episodes released, hopefully approximately once a week between October and December. And we will see where that goes. I'm going to be covering a wide variety of topics, including such things as stories about organizational change, stories about organizational culture and identity, and some terms like we've got a planned episode on competitive advantage. What does it mean? What should it mean? Can we take that away from the economists and make sense of it from an organizational perspective and also some other some other unique stories. I will have one where I'm actually going to talk about the death of a high ranking officer to whom I was associated. So between some episodes, which may be a bit light and humorous and some maybe a little bit more heavy, I hope to to vary the pace a bit and vary the mood a bit as we go through.

But I promise you that I'll do my best to keep every episode interesting.

The views expressed are my own and do not necessary reflect the United States Army War College, the United States Army or the Department of Defense. Thank you for listening and have a great day.

ALL THE BEST!
TOM GALVIN