

Trailblazers in Tech: Celebrating Black IT Leaders and the Legacy of Army Warrant Officers

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IT Warrant Officer Scholars

This article shares the collective experiences of four Army Warrant Officers who pursued terminal degrees in their fields. Each officer reflects on their unique journey, challenges, and rewards, while offering advice to those considering the same path. Their motivations were driven by personal, professional, and familial aspirations, from setting an example for their children to career advancement. Each officer emphasizes key themes such as perseverance, effective time management, and the importance of a strong support system. Their academic achievements have equipped them to make significant contributions to both the defense and technology industries while demonstrating the value of resilience and dedication in navigating the complexities of higher education.

Convergence

In today's rapidly evolving tech landscape, Black professionals continue to break barriers, innovating and leading with expertise across a variety of IT disciplines. Among them, four trailblazers stand out for their exemplary credentials and transformative contributions to the field. With a combined wealth of education, certifications, and hands-on experience, they have not only redefined success in their respective areas but have also paved the way for the next generation of IT leaders and Army Warrant Officers.

The Army Warrant Officer Corps was established in 1918 during World War I to fill technical roles requiring specialized knowledge, particularly in logistics and communications. Initially focused on tasks such as operating vessels and aircraft, Warrant Officers evolved into highly skilled experts in fields like intelligence, maintenance, and signal operations. Over the decades, they have become indispensable for providing technical leadership, and bridging the gap between enlisted personnel and commissioned officers while ensuring the successful execution of complex missions. These four professionals represent and are indicative of the excellent talent, professionalism, and leadership that Army Warrant Officers bring to military organizations and to industry after their military service is completed..

Each of these professionals has a unique journey marked by academic rigor and professional excellence while serving as an Army Warrant Officer. From degrees in computer science and engineering to specialized certifications in cybersecurity, cloud computing, and network architecture, their educational foundations have played a pivotal role in their success. Beyond academia, they have acquired cutting-edge skills and demonstrated leadership in driving innovative solutions across various units within the Army and the Department of Defense, from the White House Communication Agency to the United States Army Signal School to name a few.

Introduction

In their pursuit of academic and professional excellence, these four Army Warrant Officers created a bond and a shared desire for academic and professional success. Through this article, they aim to share their experience with others to encourage and increase the collective achievement of all. Along their journeys, they have encountered and overcome numerous challenges, developing key insights, refining their passions, and acquiring lessons that extend beyond the classroom and the battlefield. Their collective experiences offer a valuable

perspective on the commitment, innovation, and leadership required to succeed at the intersection of Defense, academia, and industry. Their scholarly and professional achievements provide a blueprint for navigating the complexities of being an IT professional while obtaining a Terminal Degree. The following provides their collective views, thoughts, and recommendations for some one desiring to pursue a terminal degree.



Brothers in Arms and Education

Pursuing a terminal degree is a path of dedication, perseverance, and immense personal and professional growth. Each of us came into this journey with distinct motivations, shaped by our life experiences, career ambitions, and the desire to contribute meaningfully to our fields. Through the challenges, rewards, and lessons learned along the way, we've each emerged not only with a degree but with a clearer sense of purpose and expertise in our respective domains.

For Dr. Wilkinson, the relentless pursuit of knowledge and a burning desire to contribute to the advancement of information technology drove me to embark on this journey. My professional and academic experiences influenced me deeply, creating a synergy that pushed me to bridge the gaps between theory and practice. I wanted to demonstrate to my daughters that through hard work and faith, anything is possible. Balancing personal and professional commitments was no small feat, but the rewards were worth it—the instant respect and academic opportunities that followed made every challenge worthwhile. Completing a terminal degree gave me a new lens through which to view both the academic and practical aspects of my work, pushing me to take a more holistic approach to problem-solving. Perseverance was key, and when faced with challenges, the most important lesson I learned was to never quit—even if I needed to slow down to regroup, stopping was never an option.

For Dr. Simpson, the motivation stemmed from both a personal challenge and career progression. As the first in my family to reach this level of education, I knew I was breaking barriers, not just for myself but for future generations. My military experience, paired with my desire to own and operate a small business, fueled my decision to pursue this degree. With the support from my best friend and wife, the decision to pursue this terminal degree served as a joint endeavor with shared gratification. The challenges were as distinct as the rewards—the demands on time and energy were greater than expected, but through my veterans benefits, I was fortunate to complete my degree without financial debt. This journey has armed me with the tools and knowledge I need to succeed as a small business owner. One of the most valuable lessons I've learned is the importance of patience and attention to detail—qualities essential for completing a dissertation. The process of gathering feedback, sometimes conflicting, from my chair and subject matter experts was a year-long challenge. Yet, in the end, the hard work paid off, reinforcing the belief that with focus and determination, success is inevitable.

For Dr. Tyler, my motivation was rooted in a desire to challenge myself and expand my understanding of the field. As a Warrant Officer, I had already established myself as a technical expert, but I saw how academic rigor could enhance that expertise, giving me a well-rounded approach to service. Earning my associate's degree early on was a small but significant milestone that showed me the value of dedication and perseverance. As I progressed in my academic career, I realized that pursuing a terminal degree was not just about achieving a title—it was about becoming a practitioner and a role model. I wanted my children to see what's possible through hard work and determination..

The academic journey also taught me the importance of time management and problem-solving. I learned to address the root causes of issues rather than just the symptoms, a skill that has benefited me both professionally and personally. My biggest challenge was managing the workload alongside my other responsibilities, but I knew that resilience—the "don't quit" mentality—was essential to overcoming these hurdles. Even when progress felt slow, I reminded myself that perseverance was my greatest asset.

Dr. Steele's path to a terminal degree was driven by career advancement opportunities, particularly in executive or academic roles. The rapid pace of technological change made it clear that continuing education was essential to staying relevant in the field. My wife was a significant source of inspiration and support throughout this journey. Together, we navigated the academic demands, family responsibilities, and personal sacrifices that came with pursuing terminal degrees simultaneously, all while raising a newborn. Balancing these commitments was challenging, but we learned the importance of setting realistic goals and maintaining strong support systems. I also developed a deeper understanding of the gaps between academic research and industry practices, a perspective that has enhanced my ability to bridge IT and business in my work. Throughout this process, perseverance and self-discipline were key, as was the value of networking and collaboration. I also learned to accept and grow from constructive criticism, using setbacks as opportunities for growth. One of my guiding principles, and something I emphasized to my family, was the importance of maintaining work-life balance. This mindset not only helped me succeed academically but also ensured I could maintain a healthy balance in my personal life.

Through these shared experiences, each of us has gained invaluable lessons about the importance of resilience, time management, and the ability to adapt to challenges. Our journeys highlight not only the dedication required to earn a terminal degree but also the importance of staying true to one's goals and values. Whether inspired by a desire to set an example for our children, advance in our careers, or contribute to the advancement of our fields, we have all emerged stronger, more knowledgeable, and ready to lead in our respective domains. The sacrifices made along the way—whether time, financial, or personal—were significant, but the rewards have been immeasurable. As we move forward, we carry with us the insights, skills, and perspectives gained through our academic journeys, ready to make a lasting impact in the fields of information technology and business administration.

Dr. Steele chose a full-time remote learning option, primarily due to work commitments, learning preferences, and family responsibilities. "Having a strong support system—our tribe—was essential," Dr. Steele notes, emphasizing the importance of setting realistic goals and deadlines while regularly adjusting strategies. Financing the degree through private loans, Dr. Steele advises starting research early to explore all options. The experience of alumni, like Dr. Tyler a fellow Capella Graduate who had successfully completed the program, also influenced Dr. Steele's decision.

Pursuing a terminal degree was a significant commitment for each of us, shaped by our personal motivations and professional ambitions. For Dr. Simpson, it was the merger of military experience and a desire for business ownership that led to choosing a full-time, online program. "Time management was key," Corey says, recalling long weekends spent reading and researching, all while balancing a full-time profession. The Post 9/11 GI Bill and VA benefits helped ease the financial burden, and securing as many grants as possible became a crucial part of the journey. Corey chose National University because of its favorable student-to-instructor ratio and program availability, which aligned with his career goals.

Each of us faced our own unique challenges, but the shared lesson was the importance of balancing responsibilities and seeking out the support we needed to succeed.

For Dr. Wilkinson, his journey was driven by a desire to create a better future for his children and demonstrate to them that anything is possible. In his case, a full-time remote learning option was the only viable choice given the demands of his work and family life. However, the distance learning environment presented unique challenges that required him to adopt new strategies for networking and collaboration. Ian says, "this involved seeking out opportunities to connect with fellow students and faculty both online and in person at conferences and workshops. As I progressed through my program, I realized that a terminal degree was more than just a piece of paper; it represented a commitment to lifelong learning and a desire to contribute to the field of information technology."

Lessons Learned

For Dr. Simpson, I quickly learned that patience is key—especially during the dissertation phase. Throughout my journey to earning a terminal degree, one constant has been the need for patience and persistence. Navigating feedback from both my Chair and subject matter experts took considerable time, and often the feedback didn't align. This was a year-long obstacle, but ultimately, hard work paid off. I found that attention to detail and clear communication were essential, not only in research but in verifying sources and ensuring accuracy at every step. In the end, the degree added institutional validity to my craft, proving that persistence pays off.

Dr. Steele found perseverance and self-discipline to be indispensable. Balancing the demands of academia with personal life—especially as my wife and I were pursuing terminal degrees while raising a newborn—was challenging, but through strong support systems, we managed. The program also taught me the importance of networking and collaboration, as well as how to handle setbacks by seeking mentor advice and practicing self-care. My ability to synthesize information from diverse sources improved significantly, and learning to accept constructive criticism became a key part of my growth. The value of a strong support network truly became apparent as I navigated both academic and personal challenges.

For Dr. Tyler, the journey was about staying focused on the micro goals. "I learned to stick to my plan and focus on the small steps—like eating an elephant, one bite at a time." This mindset helped me balance schoolwork with other responsibilities, and it became crucial when managing time efficiently. Completing the degree also gave me a more holistic view of both academic and practical challenges, helping me to seek solutions that addressed root causes, not just symptoms. The biggest lesson? "Don't quit," even when faced with hurdles or the temptation to take a break. Progress may slow down, but persistence is key.

Dr. Wilkinson's journey to earn a terminal degree was a transformative experience, underscoring the power of resilience and a steadfast commitment to learning. He faced numerous challenges, from managing his time effectively to navigating complex research topics, but he emerged with a profound appreciation for perseverance and the importance of a strong support system. As he reflects, "The most significant lesson I learned was that success is not about achieving perfection but about embracing the journey, learning from mistakes, and growing through each challenge." This journey taught him that even in the face of adversity, with the right mindset and the support of loved ones, achieving goals is possible.

Each of our journeys was filled with challenges, but we found that perseverance, patience, and effective time management were critical to success. The lessons learned during this journey not only shaped our academic experiences but also prepared us for future leadership and innovation in our fields

Lasting Words of Advice

Throughout our journeys, we have each found motivation in our unique ways, drawing on personal experiences and mantras that have kept us grounded and focused. Dr. Steele emphasizes the importance of balance, both professionally and personally. “I sign all my work emails with the same note: ‘I respect the boundaries between our work/career and personal lives. Should you receive emails from me during a time that is not during your designated work hours, please protect your time and respond during your work hours.’” This focus on respecting boundaries and maintaining a healthy work-life balance was not only advice but a lived principle that kept Steele grounded during the rigorous demands of the degree.

Dr. Wilkinson emphasized the importance of perseverance and a supportive network. He reminds us, “The path to success is rarely easy, filled with challenges and moments of doubt. However, by staying focused, learning from mistakes, and surrounding yourself with a supportive network, you can overcome any obstacle, go beyond your goals, and achieve your dreams.”

For Dr. Tyler, the mantra that resonated most deeply was, “I haven’t come this far, to just come this far.” This reminder encapsulates the importance of perseverance. It means that once you’ve invested significant effort and hard work into a goal, stopping short simply isn’t an option. “My only talent,” Aaron adds, “is that I don’t quit.” This mindset of persistence through adversity has been crucial to navigating the ups and downs of the academic and professional journey.

Lastly, Dr. Simpson offered a simple yet powerful piece of advice: “Do it or don’t do it... just commit.” That sense of commitment and determination was essential for seeing the process through, reminding us all that success begins with a firm decision to move forward, no matter the challenges.

Conclusion

The journeys of these four Army Warrant Officers to obtaining their terminal degrees exemplify the power of commitment, patience, and perseverance. Each officer, through their distinct motivations and challenges, has emerged stronger and more knowledgeable, ready to lead in their respective fields. Whether balancing professional responsibilities, family life, or academic demands, they all share one common lesson: success is rooted in determination and a clear sense of purpose. Their stories offer inspiration and practical advice for those aspiring to achieve similar goals, demonstrating that with the right mindset and support, anything is possible..

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Completed his Doctor of Business Administration (DBA) in May 2024, is dedicated to enhancing information security practices for small businesses. His dissertation, Understanding the Importance of Information Security for Small Businesses, underscores his commitment to business development, process improvement, and performance leadership. With a focus on cybersecurity from a business perspective, Devon seeks to make a significant impact in helping small businesses safeguard their digital assets. Devon retired as Chief Warrant Officer Three in the Signal Corp.	Completed his Doctor of Information Technology (DIT) in July 2024, has explored the cutting-edge field of blockchain technology. His dissertation, Blockchain Adoption in Healthcare: A Qualitative Study of Expert Strategic Recommendations, explores how blockchain can revolutionize healthcare systems. Christian’s experience in solution deployment, project, and program management, and IT troubleshooting ensures that his work not only theorizes about future technologies but also offers practical applications for today’s healthcare challenges. Christian retired as Chief Warrant Officer Three in the Signal Corp	Completed his PhD in Information Technology Education in May 2020, and has a specialized focus on adult learning and the integration of technology in educational settings. His dissertation, User Acceptance of Web 2.0 Technologies by Faculty in the Online Classroom: A Correlational Study, reflects his deep understanding of technology acceptance models and their applications in learning management systems (LMS). Aaron’s skills in adult learning, technology acceptance, and quantitative research position him as a thought leader in educational technology. Aaron retired as Chief Warrant Officer Five in the Signal Corp	Completed his Doctor of Information Technology (DIT) in December 2020, bringing his cybersecurity and risk management expertise to the forefront. His dissertation, Cybersecurity Using Risk Management Strategies of U.S. Government Health Organizations, illustrates his focus on strategic risk management within highly regulated sectors. With additional expertise in adult education and organizational management, Ian is a multifaceted professional with a deep understanding of how to mitigate cybersecurity risks in government health organizations. Ian is currently serving as a Chief Warrant Officer Five in the Signal Corp.