David M Phillips
“Mike”

I grew up in south Florida, in the early days of the space race. “Air Power” was a favorite on TV, and a football coach with Air Force experience gave me an early booklet on a “new” academy that had just started up in Colorado. Four years later I was there, wanting to go towards space. Astronautical engineering seemed a good start. Academics came easier than the military stuff, but eventually both worked out. Serving on the Honor Committee as one of the three leaders in our class was a high point, along with competing for a Rhodes Scholarship back in Florida. While that failed, an Atomic Energy Commission Fellowship let me get a master’s degree in nuclear engineering at Georgia Tech before starting pilot training down in Valdosta, GA.

UPT showed that I was a good pilot, but not a great pilot. I got a C-141 assignment at Charleston that delayed the inevitable assignment to Vietnam. When that assignment came up, it was listed as an OV-10, which would build my count for the hours needed to qualify for Test Pilot School, which remained a goal to move toward getting into space. The real assignment, however, when it was final, was for an O-2, a prop aircraft that would not count toward the needed time. My protest failed, and I ended up at Tan Son Nhut as a “Rash FAC.” The assignment gave me leadership responsibility in the unit as a young captain, which would not have happened in the OV-10. And then the test pilot application rules changed about prop time so that those 400 hours counted. I describe this because you may find yourself getting assignments you didn’t seek. My experience was that all assignments had both great and not so great moments—but all built towards a great feeling of career fulfillment.

I returned from SEA to C-5’s at Travis, building more global transport experience. Test Pilot School at Edwards was next, where I again proved that I was not a great pilot, but could handle the types of tests that multi-engine test pilots got assigned at Wright-Patterson. The aircraft there often had unusual equipment installed in them. Most unusual was the Airborne Laser Laboratory, in which we finally managed to shoot down a test drone.

After 12 years of flying, moving from test flying to acquisition was next, introduced by DAU’s program manager course. I then got inserted into the beginnings of the B-2 Spirit development, on a small team that could not say what program we were seeking to manage. That was followed by a delightful year in Newport at the Naval War College, where our house became the “USAF Officer’s Club” for our blue suit collection. That year led to four intriguing years learning the Pentagon and the budget side of our acquisition programs. Another better than expected assignment, with four different jobs across the four years.

It was then back to Wright-Patterson to understudy a friend who was commanding the test wing we had been in together years earlier, and that I would take over from him as he moved up. After three years as vice commander and then boss, I returned to the B-2 as head of the development team, where I finished my USAF career of 26 years. (My retirement was in the Air Force Museum, next to the Airborne Laser Laboratory aircraft I had flown—that it was in the museum was a sign that my time was up, too…)

A second career followed, and I continue to enjoy it as a Principal Engineer at Carnegie Mellon University’s Software Engineering Institute. The 23 years there make it almost match the military timing, and each has been great—now I’ve had a chance to teach and write a couple of books. My wife has put up with all this for 45 years, and our daughter is now a professor at Michigan State, adding another school to our interest.

In closing, I wish you the best as you start your career—it will lead you into some things you expected, and many that you didn’t—but all will offer challenges you will long remember!