

Retired AFIMSC officer's story one of determination, perseverance

By AFIMSC Installations Directorate

Lt. Col. Paul A. Cancino was the Deputy Division Chief of AFIMSC/IZL (Installation Logistics). After 20 years of service that included 13 moves, five deployments and 3½ years in Iraq and Afghanistan, he was ready for another challenge.

Whatever he was going to do after active duty, he knew that he would want to continue to serve his country and honor those he has defended.

Although he had just graduated from the University of Texas at Austin with his second Masters in Public Affairs in the summer of 2021, his desire to compete and learn at the highest levels – with encouragement from mentors and friends – motivated him to apply to some of the most selective academic institutions in the country. Lt. Col Cancino applied to Princeton, Johns Hopkins, Harvard and Stanford. At his retirement ceremony April 22, it was announced that Lt. Col. Cancino had been admitted to Johns Hopkins and Harvard, and he had selected Harvard University's prestigious John F. Kennedy School of Government to pursue a Master's in Public Administration.

Why should his story be shared?

Lt. Col. Cancino did not have the highest GPA coming out of the U.S. Air Force Academy. In fact, his 2.25 GPA and his tsunami of demerits he accumulated had him graduate around the bottom 8%.

What made him a competitive candidate has been the strength of résumé that is built upon a career's worth of performance reports. These prominent schools look very favorably upon REAL world experience, and experience is something that both officers and enlisted members are plunged in to very early on.

Military personnel are involved in a variety of combat and contingency operations around the globe that have serious consequences militarily, politically and economically. Air Force personnel are experts in their craft, and they are also representatives of their service and country wherever they may be. Major universities are aggressively looking for candidates that set themselves apart in their fields, and more importantly have significant REAL world experience to contribute to their programs.

Military service is a calling that is held in high esteem and overwhelmingly trusted by the U.S. population. So sharing Lt. Col. Cancino's story is important because there is somebody somewhere is who may have doubts about applying to big name schools. He emphasizes that "you never know how far you go unless you start working towards your goal. The more ridiculous the goal, the better."

Cancino repeats something that Col. Joseph "Burn'em" Turnham, current commander of the 355th Wing Group at Davis-Monthan Air Force Base, Arizona, once told him:

“Shoot for the stars. At worst, you land on the moon.”