

MICHAEL BARLOW:

West Point Graduate on the Rise

Writer Kathryn Aldridge

Candidates to the West Point Military Academy must not only apply directly to the academy, but also receive a nomination, usually from a member of Congress, or the President and Vice President of the United States. Michael Barlow recently graduated from West Point with a B.S. in Sociology and received the Coates Award for Most Outstanding in the West Point Sociology Program. He is also the only cadet in the history of West Point to qualify for the National Debate Tournament four times. Michael, a young man at the age of 23 years old, has his whole life ahead of him. He shares his inspiring journey with DyNAMC readers.

Born and raised in Atlanta, Georgia, Michael Barlow participated in JRTC, the high school level of ROTC, leading to his enrollment in West Point Military Academy.



Michael Barlow

Now a recent graduate of West Point, Michael recalls that he had no interest in the military in high school. “I actually thought JRTC forced people to go into the military and I had no interest in doing that,” he told DyNAMC. “But, as time went on, I learned more about the Army and about the officers and decided that I wanted to be one. When I found out about West Point, I decided I wanted to attend the academy.”

Michael has been commissioned as a Quartermaster Officer (manager of logistics and supplies) and will go to Ft. Lee in Virginia. “From there,” he told DyNAMC, “I’ll move to Ft. Bliss in El Paso, Texas, where I’ll stay for the next two or three years in the 1st Armored Division until the Army decides to move me.” Strategically, Barlow thinks the most pressing issue facing the military is deciding when and where to commit forces. “Because,” he explained, “threats are so much more complex now, in terms of ISIS or al Qaeda.”

When asked about his experiences at the academy, Barlow told us, “West Point presents you with a combination of challenges that test you in a myriad of ways. The biggest lesson I’ve learned is that you can handle more than you can process. You just have to will yourself through the tough times. The mind is stronger than it

knows it is and, sometimes, our bodies try to convince us otherwise. I don’t mean that in just a physical sense. I mean that in terms of the fact that, sometimes, we get mentally drained and tired so we think we can’t handle pressure or stress. As long as you stay committed to doing something, and you have the drive and ambition to accomplish your goal, you will be able to do it. Doubting myself at certain times and doing the West Point training taught me that lesson very well.”

Michael’s most rewarding moment was his graduation. “It was unreal to me because I took a five-year route to West Point. I didn’t get admitted directly because my SAT scores weren’t high enough. So, they sent me to the prep school for a year to work on my academics. Then, I entered the four-year academy. Being able to actually realize that I had defied the odds and accomplished something that I wasn’t expected to accomplish was extremely rewarding for me.”

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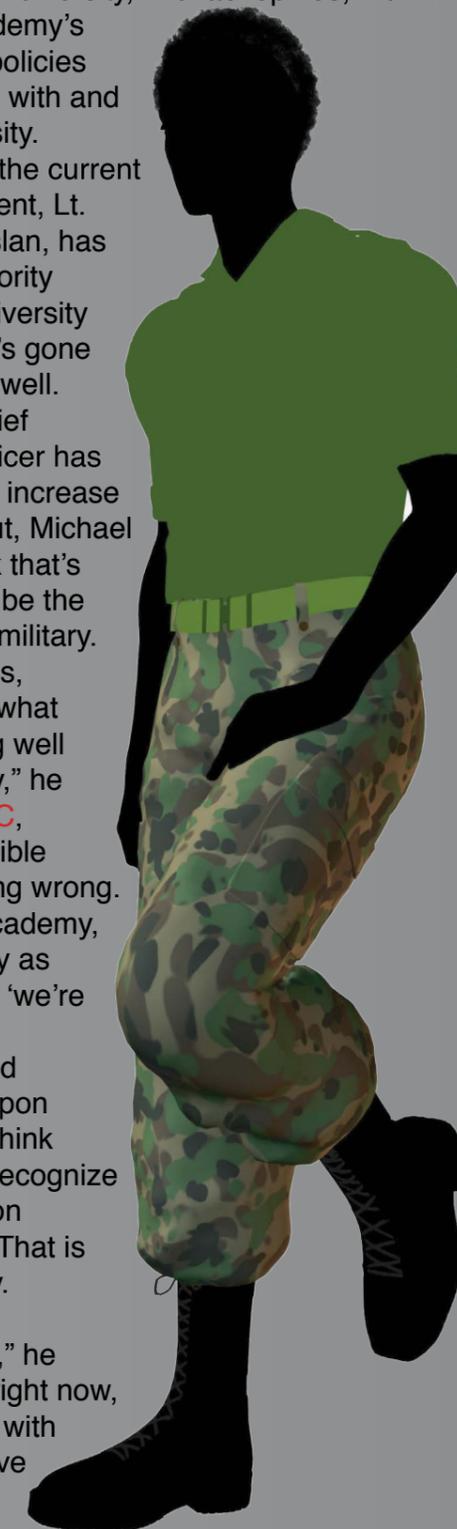
Michael told DyNAMC that his mother has been his greatest inspiration. “My mother, first and foremost, always and forever, has been my biggest cheerleader, critic, supporter, and chastiser, and I love her to death for it,” he proclaimed. “She is a mother of nine. We grew up extremely poor, but she always pushed me to be great and realize my potential. She knew what was best for me even when I didn’t. Still, today, she tells me that I’ll do things I can’t imagine and that hasn’t wavered—ever. Absolutely everything I have done, and continue to do, is to realize a dream that she put into me as a young boy.”

Michael offered some very helpful advice for anyone enlisting in the military. “Have specific goals. It’s easy to get lost in the military. It teaches you what to think and if you don’t have specific goals and a sense of yourself in the

world, it’s easy to get lost within that. That’s not to say there’s anything wrong with Army values. But, I do think that the Army should help you become a better you, not replace the person you are. It’s a people business. The Army, at its core, is about leading soldiers, and soldiers are people. If you don’t know who you are, you lose yourself and forget where you came from. If that happens, you’ll have a lot of trouble influencing and leading people.”

In the area of diversity, Michael opines, “I think that the academy’s values and policies directly align with and praise diversity. Specifically, the current Superintendent, Lt. General Caslan, has made his priority increasing diversity and I think it’s gone exceedingly well. Also, the Chief Diversity Officer has done a lot to increase diversity.” But, Michael doesn’t think that’s what should be the focus of the military. “A lot of times, focusing on what they’re doing well with diversity,” he told DyNAMC, “makes invisible what it’s doing wrong. I think the academy, and the Army as well, takes a ‘we’re all soldiers’ viewpoint and forces that upon everyone. I think we need to recognize and champion differences. That is true diversity.

“The military,” he continued, “right now, is grappling with how to resolve



the question of transgendered service members. I think they could do better in this regard because it hasn't been resolved. The easy answer is that transgendered soldiers should be allowed to openly serve, just as anybody else. There are critics who talk about the medical needs of a transgender soldier, etc. We need to accelerate the process of allowing transgender soldiers to openly serve. That's an issue the nation is struggling with, so it's understandable that the military is struggling with it, as well. We, as a nation, can do better."

For those who are seeking to become a West Point cadet, Michael's advice is, "Endure the admissions process. A lot of people eliminate themselves by not finishing it. It is tedious and it is rigorous for the intentional purpose of testing how badly you want to be a cadet. If you think the admissions process is hard, just wait until you become a cadet. Also, try to become BFFs with your regional admissions officer, because when your name comes up and you have some weakness, it's that person who will give the recommendation and be able to explain to the other members of the Admissions Board why you should be accepted. For me, it was Captain Veronica

Fitch. I wanted to talk to her every week because I knew I was weak in my academic test scores. But if she could see that I was a strong candidate in other areas, she could advocate for me and push me forward. 'The squeaky wheel gets the grease' and you want to be that squeaky wheel. Even if it means them fighting for you to at least get into the prep school."

That's hard to find in life, but it is vitally important to find at West Point. Invest in those people and have them invest in you and your well-being. They can be mentors or peers; but find those people who can enable you to succeed. And don't get complacent. -Barlow

As a graduate of the academy, Michael advises future cadets, telling **DyNAMC**, "West Point will test you; and for me, it tested me in multiple ways. One of the biggest ways was Physics II. But, there is a saying at West Point, 'Cooperate to graduate.' There's

always someone who is better than you at everything...unless you're perfect. In which case, you don't belong at West Point. Find meaningful friends, people who understand you and want the best for you. That's hard to find in life, but it is vitally important to find at West Point. Invest in those people and have them invest in you and your well-being. They can be mentors or peers; but find those people who can enable you to succeed. And don't get complacent."

When Michael speaks about his future, he reflects, "I've always been the type of person who knew exactly what my major would be. But, when I picked my major, I ended up changing it. I had a life plan, but sixteen year-old me had it backwards. So, here's 23-year-old me, trying to figure out what I want to do, and I still don't know. I have things I'm interested in, but I will be in active service for eight years, at which point, I hope I've completed at least one company command position. If I like the Army, if I like the work I'm doing and the people I'm doing it with, I'll stay in a little longer. But if I get an interesting job offer in the civilian sector that I think will make me happy, I'll take that offer. I may go to grad school. I've been thinking about going to

business school and working as an investment banker, or maybe a sociology program to explore black studies more in depth and become a college professor. The future is wide open for me right now."

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