

Claire Clancy

Doctor Daniel Pike

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### Charting a New Course: From Tactical Operations to Teaching English

When I was 12 years old, I set my sights on attending a U.S. military academy and becoming an officer, devoting all my personal and academic efforts towards that end. Nine years later, I graduated as an ensign in the U.S. Navy, proudly holding my degree in history alongside my commissioning certificate. At the time, I had no idea what my future would hold and certainly never considered returning to teach at any institution of higher learning, much less the Naval Academy.

I do not have a coherent answer when asked why I chose to study history at university. I enjoyed it but never considered it a passion. Reading, especially fiction, has always been a significant presence in my life, but I somehow never considered studying English. The military refers to the humanities as the “fuzzy” majors, and in the past, there has been some disdain for pursuing a course of study in the non-STEM disciplines. When I was young and began reading independently, I felt as though I had unlocked another world. However, life unfortunately demands more than just reading for fun, and my emphasis shifted towards professional development. Once college and the Navy became my main areas of focus, reading became more of a chore than a pleasure. Upon reporting to my first ship, my focus shifted to reading technical publications, tactical bulletins, and joint planning procedures while also trying to adapt to this new world. I lost all motivation

to read for the sake of adventure and began learning a new language: Navy-speak. My waking hours were consumed with achieving advanced qualifications and getting through deployments with my mental and physical health intact. My passion for learning, driven by sheer enjoyment and the pursuit of fulfillment through reading, had all but disappeared.

Four years and three deployments into my Navy career, a pivotal moment arrived when my Commanding Officer urged me to apply for the life-changing Olmsted Program. This program, which sent officers to all corners of the world to learn a new language and culture, was a turning point in my career. Selected for Dresden, Germany, I embarked on a journey that would reignite my passion for learning.

The idea of returning to school and learning a language after spending years on warships was, frankly, terrifying. The feeling wasn't assuaged after the first day when the instructor introduced himself by saying, "Okay. That was the last English we will speak for the next six months." I had to find a way to make learning fun because my survival in Germany would depend on it. A friend of mine suggested watching Disney movies and reading children's books in German because I already knew the plots.

Almost imperceptibly and entirely unintentionally, that spark for learning reignited. I started pursuing hobbies I had abandoned because now I could practice my German and have fun. I started singing, reading, watching enjoyable movies, and baking – all in German. I learned that the more fun I was having, the more I learned. It was challenging and frustrating at times, but my motivation to enjoy the process of learning a new language grew every day.

After my time in Germany, I was eager to apply the lessons I had learned to the ship. I wanted to instill in my junior officers the same love of learning and teach them that life is more than just qualifications and technical publications. Being an effective and capable military officer requires empathy and a deep understanding of what it is to be human. How else can one expect to inspire Sailors to endure months at sea?

I began hosting training and mentoring sessions while deployed, seeking ways to motivate and inspire our younger officers to pursue their studies and continue their professional growth. I found immense personal and professional fulfillment in adapting my teaching style to cater to diverse learning styles, fostering critical thinking, and continually expanding my capacity as an educator and trainer. The joy and fulfillment I found in fostering creativity and critical thinking in my students were powerful motivators that kept me engaged in my teaching role.

Six years later, in 2024, I learned about an open opportunity to become a Permanent Military Instructor (PMI) at USNA. The program enables Lieutenant Commanders in the Navy to serve their final years before retirement as military instructors at the Naval Academy. I had previously helped a friend apply, so I was familiar with the program; however, I was discouraged by the emphasis on STEM disciplines.

I knew I wanted to teach, but I had no interest in pursuing higher education in technical fields. I did not feel passionate enough about history to commit the remainder of my military career to teaching in that discipline. I saw, however, that English was on the open list of applications, and I immediately knew it was right for me. My escape during deployment had been my old favorites, such as *Pride and Prejudice*, *The No. 1 Ladies'*

*Detective Agency*, and *The Call of the Wild*. The more I read fiction, the more I wanted to write and read. I loved the idea of pursuing open and curious discussion through literature, encouraging creativity in a career field often noted for its rigidity, and serving as a reminder that humanity *and* the humanities were critical for a successful naval career.

Starting my MA in English Studies in 2024 was daunting, however. I have become a technical and operational expert onboard warships, having served as a naval mariner, operations officer, and tactical practitioner. But academia? It felt more foreign than Germany when I first moved. The Naval Academy, after all, is not your typical university, so I felt less than qualified to begin a rigorous master's program. However, just as I became qualified as a destroyer, my approach was to take each class one step at a time. This personal struggle and growth in the transition from a tactical to an educational role is something I believe many can empathize with.

I quickly fell into a rhythm and became increasingly excited about exploring various aspects of English Studies. Curriculum design, linguistics, Jane Austen, and magical realism were all on the agenda. I thought my passion was going to be in discussing fiction, as well as linguistics and curriculum design. It seemed logical as fiction is my favorite fare for reading, and curriculum design and linguistics work well with my passion for planning and languages. What surprised me most, however, was the frankly revelatory experience of writing my final reflections in ENG 501: Approaches to Research.

I initially felt that the course might be basic or even boring at the beginning. I was confident in my research abilities but unsure how I could be challenged in the course. Professor Hicks, however, encouraged each of us to pick a subject about which we were

personally invested and use that as our “base camp” for research. When I realized the course was not simply about regurgitating information but about applying research methodology to a subject that mattered to me, my entire conception changed.

I have always advocated what I call “radical authenticity” in military leadership. Often, we are presented with the physically intimidating, combat-tested male veteran who describes leadership as a loud, almost confronting trait. While that style has its place, it has never felt authentic to me. The leaders that resonated most strongly with me were those who were unapologetically themselves. Whether it was my executive officer, who would knit in the evenings to quiet his mind while at sea, or the prior Marine infantryman who read science fiction at lightning speed, I was drawn to an often contradictory notion of leadership in the military. I gravitated towards those who, in whatever style suited them, treated each sailor and officer as a unique individual deserving of personalized empathy and leadership.

It was during my research project for ENG 501 that I realized that was exactly what I wanted to bring to my classroom. Midshipmen are often treated like boot camp candidates, and it can be a dehumanizing and demoralizing experience. I decided to adopt an approach to my classroom that taught not only classical military traits, such as resilience and toughness, but also characteristics like empathy, creativity, and compassion. “Hearts and minds” is often a tongue-in-cheek phrase used to describe the “softer” side of the military, but humanizing military service takes courage. Far from being antithetical to producing courageous and resilient leaders, the humanities are a cornerstone in ensuring military officers are deeply invested in what it means to be human.

Where I will be after my five years at USNA is anyone's guess. However, the art of language, whether through literature, foreign language learning, or creative writing, will remain a cornerstone of what makes me passionate about learning. I certainly anticipate challenges in adopting a more humanistic teaching style in a structured military setting. Still, the shock of creativity, in contrast to rigidity, is crucial for awakening the brain and sparking new ways of thinking. Creative thinking leads to creative problem-solving, and empathetic reading leads to leaders with compassion. Ultimately, I am committed to fostering the same attitude in my classroom as I did on the ship. I hope to encourage critical thinking and creativity as much as technical expertise.