

# CPT Westly LaFitte

## **Please tell us a little about yourself**

I am a field artillery officer and 2007 graduate of USMA from Shreveport, Louisiana. My wife is an AG officer that works at USMA in ODIA. We have one daughter and a dog. Aside from the Masters from Columbia, I hold another Masters from Webster University.

## **Can you please describe your duties as a Tactical Officer (TAC)?**

I am the legal commander and synchronizer of all elements of development for a 125 cadet organization. TAC's wear many hats and therefore an exact job description is difficult to codify. The best way to put it is we are involved in every aspect of a cadet's life to a detail that no other position at the academy can offer. We are with the cadets through their entire journey, not just a semester. This job provides the most opportunity to make a difference in a cadet's life. Additionally, TACs are required to be able to influence through a cadet chain of command a company without the reliance of a robust and experience NCO chain of command. We have one NCO and between the two of us we manage a company's administration and training. It requires creativity and an ability influence through multiple layers of an organization unique to the academy.

## **What made you decide to serve as a TAC?**

I never thought I would return to the academy after I graduated. I recall looking in the rearview mirror as I left as a cadet thinking, "Well that's over. I'm never coming back!" I wanted to make sure others did not have that kind of feeling about their academy experience. I enjoy mentorship and helping others develop. I wanted to help others grow as leaders and felt like coming to USMA was a great way to influence the next generation of officer to be better than our generation.

## **What has been the most rewarding part of serving as a TAC at USMA?**

Seeing the product of my influence on cadets in my company, in the classroom, and in various cadet organizations I support. It is amazing to see the growth that these young men and women experience during their time at the academy.

## **How has serving as a TAC prepared you for future assignments back in the operational Army?**

The ELDP experience has taught me to be more patient and to gain perspective on situations before making a decision. The TAC position is very much like being an S-3 or XO. You have to lead through the cadets and allow them to exercise their own mission command. As the TAC, I allow my cadets to command. I act on the environment and resource the organization in order to allow them to be a successful unit. The job teaches you to rely more upon leading through others. It teaches you to have a more executive approach to leadership as opposed to solely relying upon direct leadership.

I would also say that this job has enhanced my ability to build meaningful relationships with peers and seniors. Many important activities TACs engage in depend upon TACs having good working relationships with people within and outside the organization both military and civilian alike. Having the ability to influence up and outside the chain of command is a valuable skill for field grade officers.

Finally, the job has taught me to be comfortable with significant responsibility when I have limited control. As a TAC you are responsible for everything even if you have no control over the situation, more so than as a line company commander. Having the ability to manage an organization with many moving and seemingly disparate parts without full control of every piece is an activity I am glad I am allowed to practice prior to taking over as an S-3 or XO.

### **What was your graduate school experience like at Teachers College – Columbia University?**

Different and enlightening. This is my second Masters experience. I did not learn how to be a leader by going to Columbia. I did learn how to contextualize my experience and more appropriately articulate my personal methods of leadership. The college will expose you to many different perspectives that you might not see in the military. Although I did not learn how to be a leader at TC, I did learn how to be a better military leader and I learned how to translate military leadership into civilian leadership. I was very involved in student life and student leadership. I served as a senator for the college's Student Senate. I learned how to adapt my leadership style to fit that environment.

### **How has this assignment been in terms of family time and work-life balance?**

The job is as busy as you make it, but it is inherently busy. I have a dual military family, so the balance has to be deliberate. It is not the traditional "take a knee" job. It does provide time for reflection and a challenge that will make one grow as a professional. I think it is the very definition of a broadening assignment.

I see the cadets as an extension of my family. I have 126 little brothers and sisters. They know my family and my family knows them. My family is also a tool for their development as it serves as a reminder that TACs are people too. We have lives, families, and challenges like other people. It is important that we model that for cadets. I use my wife to teach and develop cadets. I use my own situation to discuss dual military life. I say all this to show that managing the time spent with the family has to be creative and can serve a second purpose of developing the cadets.

My wife and I love the stability of knowing we won't deploy. We have started having children because we know for at least 3 years we will get to see our kids grow up without having to leave. This is a great place to start and raise a family. The community is

unparalleled. We live off-post and make the short commute from Cornwall. Whether you live on or off-post (both have their drawbacks), schools are great and the sense of community is wonderful.

Even though the hours can be long and odd sometimes, the cadets make it all worth it. The work-life balance is just like anywhere else except with different challenges.

**What advice would you give to officers who are considering applying to become a TAC?**

If you are looking to relax for 3 years, look elsewhere. The job is intense because that's the level of commitment cadets deserve. If you are looking to grow as a leader and to have a major impact on the Army, this might be the job for you. Reach out to people who have been here in the job, there is a lot of misinformation in the force on how going to West Point kills careers. That is absolutely not true. This assignment will enhance you as a person and teach you some valuable skills for life and organizational leadership.