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**The dream chasers**

When I was a kid, I was like a rubber ball, which you can hardly predict where it will go, once it hits the ground. Wanting to be an adventurer like Indiana Jones, I hated to stay at the same place and often bicycled to the unvisited towns near my home. Since I was a kid, the distance I could travel with bicycle was limited and I wished own an airplane to go abroad. One day, I started to dream of being a pilot who flies to all over the world. As I grew up, however, I began to dislike getting on an airplane for I often felt nausea whenever I got on the airplane for a long time. Eventually, I gave up the dream and now, I wish to be a successful businessman although, sometimes, I still dream myself being a pilot. While struggling to decide what I am going to focus on for the project, the old dream popped in my head. I thought it would be great if I do my project on aviation which I once yearned to study.

Once my mind was settled, I realized that I didn't have any information or idea on how to start researching aviation. I didn't know if there was an aviation fraternity in UIUC or whether it was okay to study aviation students who take a particular aviation class I pick. (I had not noticed the link to aviation fraternities in the official Institute of Aviation website) In the meantime, one of my friends told me that he knows a guy in Institute of Aviation. With my friend's help, I was able to contact the guy, Ho Suk Chung and I invited him to dinner. Contrary to my expectation that he would look active and healthy, he rather looked smart and calm. After introducing each other, I asked him how he had decided to choose pilot as his career. He said that he wanted to become a pilot from childhood and thought that becoming a pilot would bring him a lot

of fun because he likes to travel.

The conversation I had with Ho Suk gave me a basic idea of how to start my ethnography project; he informed me of existence of an aviation club in University of Illinois and he told me an email address of Dan Mark Skelsky, the head of the club. Although Ho Suk had joined the fraternity at the beginning of the first semester, he had not attended any meeting of the fraternity. So, without earning any detailed information, I emailed Dan to explain my project and that was how I first contacted him and the start of my one-semester long project.

The aviation fraternity that Dan is in charge of is called Alpha Eta Rho, which stands for “air” in Greek words. Dan, a sophomore in Institute of Aviation was elected as the president of AHP, in 2005. He always wanted to become a pilot as a kid and he got a flight license in high school.

Alpha Eta Rho(AHP) is collegiate co-ed, professional fraternity founded to bring together students who have a common interest in the field of aviation. It was first founded at University of Southern California (USC) in 1929, led by Professor Earl W. Hill who had felt the need for an extracurricular activity for promoting and organizing the interest in aviation at USC. Under the professor’s leadership, the fraternity continued to grow in size and now, there are around 50 active chapters throughout the United States.<sup>1</sup> AHP in University of Illinois was established in 1954 and it has been remaining active except for few years in 1990s due to the deployment of all executive members of the fraternity to Iraq<sup>2</sup>.

There are two kinds of meeting that AHP holds on Thursday at 7 P.M; official meeting and unofficial meeting called “hangout-day.” The official meeting is held every

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<sup>1</sup> “Alpha Eta Rho History” [K-State at Salina](#)

<sup>2</sup> “Alpha Eta Rho Chi Chapter” [University of Illinois Institute of aviation](#)

other Thursday at room 252 in Mechanical Engineering Building (MEB) and all major issues concerning the fraternity and school works are discussed: fundraising, flight tests and so on. The hangout day is also on Thursdays that AHP doesn't have an official meeting and the meeting place is usually a bar.

The AHP meeting I attended for the first time was a little bit different from regular official meeting because a guest speaker was invited to the meeting to share his experience in military and commercial airlines. On Thursday (February 9<sup>th</sup>), I went to Mechanical Engineering Building with Ho Suk. The mechanical building was totally unfamiliar to me since it was my first time being in the building. As I walked through the hall way on the first floor, I noticed only hallway had light on. Ho Suk and I seemed to be the only ones in the building and one flickering light made the building look gloomy. "Are they really having a meeting, here? It seems a ghost will pop out and freak me out." Ho Suk said. I didn't have to answer his joke for we could hear people talking on the second floor, as we approached the stairs. The room 252 was the only class that had people and had light on the floor.

"Hey, how is it going, dude. You would be the guy who sent me an email, right?" Dan greeted us as I walked into the room. As I turned around, I saw three military men, each busy preparing for presentation they were about to start. The airmen all wore naval uniforms, but the uniforms looked rather like work clothes with a long zipper. Only one airman was wearing a formal brown military uniform decorated with small flags and a shining badge on his chest. Behind them, there were four students sitting quietly. They looked up into our faces with curiosity since they hadn't seen us before. The room's seating capacity was 45, so the room looked almost empty. As we watched the hall fill up gradually, I noted a girl who dressed as if she planned to go to a

party after the meeting (Later, I discovered that her name is Jordan she is a vice president of AHP). She was wearing a white tank top under a short blue denim jacket and sky-blue denim miniskirt. It was in a way surprising that such an unlikely combination of a party girl and aviation existed in this fraternity.

The meeting was started with Dan's quick announcements and the airmen initiated the presentation by briefly introducing themselves. The guest speaker, Captain Haas, was a marine reserve pilot who flies commercially for Delta airlines. He got Navy Reserve Officers Training Corps (ROTC) scholarship from University of Missouri and had never experienced a flight before entering college. He served as a pilot for 18 years in Navy as a pilot. Other pilots who accompanied the Captain were Major Hill and Captain Schoonover. They graduated University of Hawaii at Manoa and they are currently marine officers at Marine Officer Candidate School. Although Captain Haas said that "I'm here to compare and contrast the commercial airline industry versus what you have available at the military," the main topic of his presentation was to explain the benefits students receive from entering the military and the steps they have to go through to become a pilot. Taking an oath to enter military after college would provide financial aid to students. Also major airlines would give top priority to people who have an aviation experience in the military on selecting their aviators. They explained that there are three steps to go through to become a pilot in the military: The Basic School (TBS), Officer Candidate School (OCS) and the flight school. The main focus in TBS is physical training, military skills and problem solving, whereas OCS mainly focuses on leadership. Getting an admission from flight schools is relatively harder than it is to get into OCS and TBS. Operating jet aircraft requires not only excellent physical and mental conditions but also pilot's ability of making quick and accurate judgments in few

seconds because the jet aircraft generally cruises at 0.75 to 0.85 Mach, which is 75% to 85% of speed of sound.<sup>3</sup>

When Captain Haas was about to start explaining the aircrafts that U.S Navy has, one guy sitting behind me asked him a question. “Sir, how would you compare OCS to TBS?” “Well, I would say, OCS is much more difficult.” Captain Haas replied. Captain Schoonover intervened in the conversation to answer the question in detail. “At TBS, you just jump in(to work) without thinking because they are telling exactly what you have to do, but at OCS they (officers) just say ‘hey here’s what I want to happen’ and you are in charge of making it happen. They are putting leadership responsibility on you.” Ho Suk who had been listening quietly asked them if the schools are only for U.S citizens. “Correct. I’m sorry to say this, but you have to have your security clean and therefore you have to be a U.S citizen” Captain Schoonover replied.

As the airmen started explaining the name and characteristics of aircrafts used in Navy, I started to feel bored since I could not understand the technical terms they used constantly. It seemed that I was the only one not understanding what the airmen were saying. While club members were admiring the speed of a jet and the advanced landing system of helicopters and jets, I was admiring their comprehension of military aircraft. Along with boredom, I also felt shame in my lack of effort to gain information about the presentation. I could have asked Dan or even the guest speakers about aviation before the presentation started.

Instead of listening to what airmen said, I looked around the class to observe the club members. Besides Ho Suk and me, everyone but one Asian were Caucasians. One guy who had expressed his interest of joining military after he graduate college was

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<sup>3</sup> “Jet aircraft” [Wikipedia](#)

the only one writing down some information, other than me. His face looked serious but oddly he was shaking his legs. What was even more peculiar, he was wearing flip-flops despite of the freezing temperature outside the building. The girl whom I thought as a clubber was the only female club member at the room. Since she was sitting at the front, I could not see her face expression. But I was sure that she was as bored as I was for she constantly checked her watch. The Asian guy, who had a thick piercing on his left ear, was comfortably leaning the wall as he listened to what airmen said.

At the regular AHP official meeting, the AHP members actively participate in a debate. Even though, 57 students joined the fraternity, there are usually around 15 to 20 people coming for the meeting. They are the actual members who run the club. On March 2<sup>nd</sup>, AHP had a joint meeting between WIA(Women In Aviation), another national fraternity in UIUC. To explain WIA concisely, it is a national fraternity, which was first organized in 1994 and established in UIUC by Annmarie Craven, a flight instructor at the Institute of Aviation in 1998. Since most female students in WIA also joined AHP, the two clubs often meet together. But unlike AHP, WIA holds a meeting once a month and WIA focuses on fund-raising to support regional and national conferences.

As I walked into the room 252 in MEB with the sweet expectation that the room would have been filled pretty ladies, I was disappointed by the number of students. There were only eight students and what was worse, only three of them were girls. “Hey, Hyung. How’s it going?” Dan who was standing next to the door greeted me. Next to Dan, one chubby girl was sitting on a desk. Her name was Laura and she was a president of WIA. Dan introduced me to Laura. Laura greeted me with a smile and after she heard about my project she promised me to give her full support. I sat on

the seat where I had sat last time. One guy called Brian was sitting at the seat in second row and he started asking a girl eating brownie how she had been. As I turned right, I saw the guy who is planning to join military. Again, he was wearing flip flops.

A couple more students came in before the meeting started at 7:15. Dan initiated the meeting with some announcements about a bake sale. WIA and AHP had been planning to have fund-raising to support WIA conferences and the plan was to sell sandwiches with soda at Willard Airport on Monday (March 6). They participated in giving their opinions about which sandwich shop they would choose. The first chosen sandwich shop was Potbelly but some people didn't like it. "The only reason I picked Potbelly was (because) I worked there and I thought I would get some discount" Dan said. They presumed that the approximate benefit for selling one sandwich would be one dollar. When, they had to decide who would be selling sandwiches at the airport, most students in the room volunteered. "I got a test on Monday, but whatever. I'll do it." The girl who had been talking to Brian said so with a smile.

As they discussed the fundraising, I observed the room's condition. The room that had appeared clean was somewhat disorderly room. The curtains were not fully raised and slanted to one side and some blocks on the ceiling were about to drop. But, the chair was in neat order. Whiling looking around the room, Laura, the head of WIA, came up and announced their schedule for the rest of semester. She handed out a schedule paper and went over everything on it briefly. The announcement was about skydiving trip and field trip to Indiana on April. As, Laura passed out the sign-up sheet, she said these will be the first and the last trip in this year. Students seemed excited for they eagerly encouraged each other to join the trip.

The unofficial meeting, "hangout day" provided me opportunities to observe

the different aspect of aviation student's lives. On Thursday (March 9<sup>th</sup>), AHP students met a bar called Murphy located at the corner that Green Street and Sixth Street intersects. I had not been there before and thought the bar was outside the campus. So I asked Dan, the head of AHP for a ride and Jordan, a vice president of AHP picked me up in front of my dormitory. She was wearing similar clothes that she had worn at the first meeting I had attended. While she was driving, we had a short conversation. Like Ho Suk and Dan, she wanted to be a pilot since she was a kid and she thought it would be better to fly than to go to classes.

We got to the bar first, and took a seat next to a long table. Murphy was a typical bar that sold not just alcohols but also some foods. The bar was dark and TVs were set at every corner. Around 7:30, there were about 22 people, and the number surprised me a little bit for no previous official meeting had more than 20 people. Actually, there were new faces that I had never seen at the official meeting. Some girls in WIA (Women in Aviation) were there also.

I tried not to engage in their conversation since I wanted to know what they usually talk about at the unofficial meeting. We completely filled up the long table and some aviation students had to take another table. I changed my seat several times to listen to what they said. One guy called Jeff came in late and sat in front of me. As soon as he took a breath, he started to talk about the pop quiz he had failed. In his aviation class, he had watched a video and including him, many people fell asleep. When the class was almost over, the professor displeased by the students gave the class a pop quiz. "Why are you always so unlucky?" The girl sitting next to Jeff said so, as she showed some sympathy with a frown face. Other students in the middle of the table began to talk about their flight professor who had 17 years old son. They were shocked

by the age of his son since they had known that the professor's son was 4 years old.

Some people were planning to make a T-shirt for AHP and WIA and one guy called Nick suggested putting hammer on the ground school as a logo for the T-shirt. Including me, everyone laughed and said that was a great idea. The joke was obviously, just a joke, but in a way it reflected the pressure and stress they get from the aviation school.

Whiling eating chicken teriyaki sandwiches with others as dinner, I found one guy who looked much older than AHP people. He was tall and handsome and had tanned skin. I asked Dan who he was, and he said that he is an instructor at flight school. As he received the bottle of beer, he took out his cigarette, Marlboro Red. Students, whom I had not expected to smoke, took out their cigarettes and started smoking also.

His presence was totally unexpected for I had never seen students and teachers associate together at a bar. Since he and I were sitting at opposite end of the table and the bar was really loud, I was not able to hear what they said. However, I could see them smoking and drinking together as if they were close friends, and I seemed to be the only one who looked perplexed. I had never thought such association was unacceptable but did believe that there was an invisible boundary between students and professors.

Professors and TAs are homework, quiz and test givers and students are the takers. Obviously, students get stress from being the inferior end of the relationship, and the inevitable feelings create some distances between them. But, at the bar, there seemed not to be the invisible boundary..

Some people might have thought that aviation students have so much spare time that they meet every Thursday night to socialize with other aviation students.

However, the life of an aviation student is not as simple as it appears to be. The mandatory classes that aviation-major students have to take require more effort and time than other classes that have the same credit hours as aviation classes. Each semester, the students are required to take an aviation class such as aviation 101 and 120. Since the classes are 3 credit hour courses, they have to fly three times a week for two hours. Also, there is a ground class where they learn theories and lists of technology terms in aviation and they have to attend the class two times per week for an hour and a half. So, the classes are total 9 hours of aviation class per week. However, flight school is not counted and the only class that gives credit is ground class. So the total credit hours they earn for aviation class is only four. Furthermore, they have to take a check ride, which means that they go up with an instructor in an airplane and demonstrate that they are proficient in all the maneuvers in that class you took. After they take aviation 120 in freshman year, they have to take a flight license test. The test includes two hour oral exam, flight test and 6 question test, which the questions are randomly picked from book of 600 sample questions.

The history of Institute of Aviation may explain why aviation curriculum is tough. The Institute of Aviation was founded in 1946 as Institute of aeronautical Institute at Willard Airport. The former name of the airport was University of Illinois Airport but on 1961, it was renamed as Willard airport in honor of Arthur Willard, the previous president of University of Illinois. After establishment of Institute of Aviation, Leslie A. Bryan who had been a professor of transportation at Syracuse University became a director of the Institute of Aviation at the University of Illinois from 1946 to 1968. At University of Illinois, he presided over major expansion of the university aviation program as a result, the Institute of Aviation has long been recognized for the

excellence of its flight training program.<sup>4</sup>

In the Institute of Aviation, there are three kinds airplane that AHP students aviate: Piper Archer III, Piper Arrow III and Piper Seminole. There are 18 Piper Archers, 8 Piper Arrows and 3 Piper Seminoles. Piper Archer, the most primitive type among the three aircrafts has a single engine and its horse power is 180. Freshmen begin their flight courses with Piper Archer. Half of Archers uses an avionics system called ADF, which stands for Automatic Direction Finder. ADF is one of the older types of radio navigation and it is used as a means of identifying positions, receiving low and medium frequency voice communications, homing, tracking, and for navigation on instrument approach procedures.<sup>5</sup> The other half of Archer uses more advanced avionic system called GPS, which stands for Global Positioning System. GPS is a space-based radio positioning, navigation and time data distribution system that provides precise location, speed and time to an unlimited number of military and civilian users.<sup>6</sup> A constellation of more than two dozen GPS satellites broadcasts precise timing signals by radio to GPS receivers, allowing them to accurately determine their location in any weather and anywhere on Earth.<sup>7</sup> GPS is system was made and is used by U.S Department of Defense and the satellite constellation is managed by U.S Air Force. Piper Arrow used by students who take the courses, commercial pilot 200 and 201 has a single engine and its horse power is 200. Piper Seminole, the most advanced airplane in Institute of Aviation has twin-engine and its horse power is 360. Both Arrow and Seminole have GPS system as well.

Two month of observing gave me an impression that students in aviation

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<sup>4</sup> [University of Illinois Institute of Aviation](#)

<sup>5</sup> "Automatic direction finder" [Allstar](#)

<sup>6</sup> "Global Positioning System: Space and Control Program" [GlobalSecurity](#)

<sup>7</sup> "Global Positioning System" [Wikipedia](#)

fraternities enjoy their lives by doing what they want. It may sound simple but translating it into reality requires firm determination. That is why not everyone fulfills his or her dream even if everyone has a goal at least once in their life time. The aviation students seemed to be very close to catch their dream. I often felt jealous for I still do not know exactly what kind of business I want to study. Perhaps, the biggest difference between them and me is the passion for dream.

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