

Alexis Robertson:

Welcome to The Path and the Practice, a podcast dedicated to sharing the professional origin stories of the attorneys at Foley & Lardner LLP, a full-service law firm with over 1,000 lawyers across the U.S. and abroad. I'm your host, Alexis Robertson, director of diversity and inclusion at Foley. In each episode of this podcast, you'll hear me in conversation with a different Foley attorney. You'll learn about each guest's unique background, path to law school, and path to Foley & Lardner. Essentially, you'll hear the stories you won't find on their professional bios. And of course, you'll learn a bit about their practice. Now, let's get to the episode.

Alexis Robertson:

On today's episode, I'm speaking with Patrick McMahon. Patrick is an associate in Foley's Chicago office, where he focuses on general commercial litigation as well as labor and employment matters. Patrick has a really interesting path to law school that includes serving for the U.S. Air Force. In this conversation, Patrick walks us through his decision to apply to the Air Force Academy, he shares what it was like to attend, and how it was that he went from being a pre-med to a pre-law major. Additionally, Patrick opens up a bit about the six years he spent as a communications and cyber officer, and he talks about a six-month period where he was aide-de-camp to a two-star general. While it's really interesting to hear Patrick talk about this time, what I most appreciate about our conversation is hearing him reflect on what he learned about teamwork and leadership while in the military.\

Alexis Robertson:

Also, I have to apologize. As you'll soon hear, my audio is not great in this conversation. I'm still new to podcasting, and simply forgot to check my levels before jumping in with Patrick. Fortunately, you can hear me just fine, but you might note that I sound a little tinny and a little far away from the mic. But I promise I'll check my levels going forward, and I can guarantee you that my tech problem does not at all detract from the many insights that Patrick McMahon shares during this conversation. I hope you enjoy it.

Alexis Robertson:

Hi, Patrick. Welcome to the show.

Patrick McMahon:

Good morning. Thanks very much for having me on. Honored to be even thought of for something like this, frankly.

Alexis Robertson:

Well, I'm really happy to have you, and I'm looking forward to hearing about your path to law and to Foley. But first, as I start with everyone, can you do that 30 to 90-second professional intro you would do at a networking event or if you were on a panel?

Patrick McMahon:

Sure. I am an associate in our Chicago office. I'm in the litigation department, but I have been increasingly focusing on labor and employment. I guess it's about a year ago now that I actually took the full dive and became a primary member in the labor and employment group. Really been doing labor and employment since I started, but still keeping my toes in the water of general litigation just to brush up on my litigation skills. I'm still in the stage where I still need to refine those. Yeah, just looking to focus more and more on labor and employment as I go forward.

Alexis Robertson:

What year are you at the firm? When did you join?

Patrick McMahon:

I started in 2015, so this makes me in my fifth year right now.

Alexis Robertson:

Okay. We're going to talk more about that shortly, but now let's jump, I guess, to the beginning with you, which is where are you from? Where did you grow up?

Patrick McMahon:

Well, I'm actually a Chicago-area guy. I grew up in Arlington Heights, Illinois, just northwest of here, probably about a 30, 45-minute drive out from the city, and really had, I think maybe it was a bit of a blessing, a fairly vanilla suburban life growing up in the northwest suburbs of Chicago, complete with yellow lab, one brother, one sister, and a two-parent household. In that respect, I felt very lucky. Then after high school, I went out to Colorado to go to the Air Force Academy for undergrad, and that's when my life and my life perspective changed a lot.

Alexis Robertson:

Okay. We're definitely talking about that, but I'm actually curious as to what caused you and when you decided that you even wanted to go to the Air Force Academy.

Patrick McMahon:

Man, that's a bit of a long story. I'll try to CliffsNotes it a little bit. My mother-

Alexis Robertson:

We have a little bit of time, so let's-

Patrick McMahon:

Okay. My mother went to a family reunion in Iowa. This must've been when I was about in my second semester of my sophomore year in high school. Typically, we'd go to those, but at this point I was pretty involved in sports, my younger brother and sister were as well, so she went on her own this time. It's out at a farm in Iowa with her side of the family and some second cousins twice removed, the people that you don't really see a lot but it's nice to connect with every once in a while if you have the chance.

Patrick McMahon:

She was out there, came back after a few days out there, and said she met a cousin of mine named Kyle. She said, "I met your cousin Kyle. He's at the Air Force Academy." This was right around the same time I was starting to look at colleges more seriously. To that point, I had mostly been looking out on the East Coast, Boston College, Duke, University of Virginia, schools like that. But my mother comes back and says she met this cousin of mine that was at the Air Force Academy, and my first reaction was, "Really? What is the Air Force Academy?" Didn't know what it was. Didn't know it existed. Didn't have any military in my family, except for my grandfather who was in World War II, like many of us that have grandparents that served around that time. He passed when I was young, so it wasn't like he was a major part of my life, or I had military around me growing up or anything like that.

Patrick McMahon:

It was enough to perk my interest, so I looked into it a little bit. I guess, to my surprise, the Air Force Academy was a school held in the same regard as many of the Ivy League schools and schools of that caliber, and it had a little bit extra. At that point, it was enough to convince me that I should go out and just take a visit, and I did.

Alexis Robertson:

Where is it? I realized I don't know where it is.

Patrick McMahon:

It's in Colorado Springs. Just, I guess, a little more background, so the Air Force Academy is in Colorado Springs. That's the Air Force's service academy. The Army has West Point in New York. The Navy has Annapolis in Maryland. Each service has their own service academy. I didn't even really consider the other ones. I don't, frankly, have a good reason for that, other than just my cousin Kyle was at Air Force and that's who I was going to go visit.

Patrick McMahon:

Later in my junior year I went out and visited Kyle and spent a night out there at the Air Force Academy with him. You have to understand, at these academies, you're essentially living in dorms or barracks throughout four years. You're living with all four years of students, so freshmen through seniors, and you're split up into squadrons. You're wearing uniforms every day, getting up early. Everybody goes to breakfast together, classes in the morning. At lunchtime, you march to lunch. You form up on the Terrazzo, they call it, march to lunch together.

Patrick McMahon:

I'm 17 years old at the time, and I'm spending 24 hours here, maybe not really appreciating what it would mean to live that life as much as it is to visit it. Maybe I fell in love with the uniforms a little bit or the camaraderie or just this idea of being a part of it. I convinced myself over those few days that that's what I was going to do, or at least I was going to look into it more seriously, and so I did.

Patrick McMahon:

It turned out it was a much larger process than I would've really thought to apply to college. At each one of the service academies, you have to apply to your congressman from the district that you're in and then both your senators in D.C. from your state. You apply to them. Then all of them can nominate 10 people for every spot they have at a service academy, and then the service academy picks one of those 10 to come and actually take the slot. You're applying to, essentially, almost four colleges because you have to do applications for all of them, essays. Now, obviously, you can reuse some of that stuff, but you have to nonetheless apply to all these different people. Then, on top of that, there's a physical requirement, so you have to do some running and push-ups and agility and stuff like that. This is all to say it was a very long process.

Alexis Robertson:

No kidding. I just have to reflect back on that a little bit, because I guess I'm much like... I'm basically you when you were 16 or 17 in that I don't know a lot about any of the academies. You mentioned West Point and some of the others. I've heard more about those than the Air Force Academy. But just to recap, you go to visit your cousin, you're 17, and that could've gone multiple ways. You could've gone and been like, "This is super not for me." Instead, you went and you decided, "This is something that I think I would like to do," but it's no small feat in that you then had to engage your congressman, senators, etc., on this really long application process, as a junior, senior?

Patrick McMahon:

Yeah, just around the same time frame that you'd be applying to any other college. Some of them have interviews. At the time, my representative was Mark Kirk, who was later a senator here. I ultimately took the nomination from him. You only take one. I also had an offer from Senator Durbin, but for whatever... The numbers sometimes work out that the senator would like to maybe shift the number to somewhere else and use it for another person if they know that you can get a nomination through another route, so there's kind of a numbers game that gets played. For whatever reason, I ended up getting a nomination from Mark Kirk, and there was a little breakfast, brunch thing to memorialize that. This is the first time I've really thought about this in a while, frankly.

Alexis Robertson:

I also realize some of the questions I'm asking you, I think, are a little bit the antithesis of maybe who you are as a person, but also the military, at least from what I've picked up. Because you are co-chair of our Veterans & Allies group, there really is this "I'm not here to brag about who I am or what I've accomplished." In some ways, I'm pushing up against that a little because there's part of me that's listening, thinking, "It doesn't sound that simple. It doesn't sound like maybe everybody who applies gets a nomination from some state or federal representative." I find this interesting, and I appreciate you taking the time to look back on it.

Patrick McMahon:

Yeah. No, and I'm happy to do it. I think the acceptance rate... We had, I think, around 16,000 applicants for my class, this is what I remember, and we took a class of about 1,200. There's definitely a whittling down that goes down there. And you've got to remember that we're also a Division I athletic school, so there's also a number of athletic scholarships that are given out, a lot of them for football obviously, but basketball, both on the women's and the men's side, track. We have a really good track and cross country team. But all those sports are out there too. You have 1,200 total slots, but you also have ICs, intercollegiates, is what we refer to them as, that are coming in as well. It's definitely a finite number.

Patrick McMahon:

But stepping back, you're also getting these nominations from all these different representatives and senators, and it makes sense by nature of it. It is a United States military academy. You get this wide swath of people from across the country, and that gets back to something I alluded to earlier, was just the idea of expanding my perspective on where people come from, and not only just areas of the country, but just the backgrounds generally. I largely had a pretty homogenous group of friends and social circle growing up, not by any choice, it was just a product of circumstance, but then you get out and you go to a school that... It's not even just a regional

college. It's not like going to U of I here in Illinois. You get a lot of people from the Midwest. You get people literally from all over the country, and then a smattering of international cadets as well.

Patrick McMahon:

Some of these freshmen, too, I should mention, are prior enlisted. You go to the Air Force Academy, and you get commissioned as an officer. Officers are, I'm going to throw out a number here, it could be wrong, like 12% or 15% of the force, and the rest are enlisted. Enlisted, a gross generalization, is somebody that will graduate from high school and essentially enlist in one of the services. Sometimes these people will later become officers, and one way to do that is to go to a service academy. Some of my classmates were prior enlisted, and they maybe have served in the Air Force for a number of years already. They come in with some military experience already.

Patrick McMahon:

Oftentimes, again, a generalization, don't take it too broadly here as truth for all the time, but they came from backgrounds that may have been a little more challenging. They didn't have the path to college, let alone a service academy. They went and served in the enlisted side for a while and then ended up on the officer side. There was a lot of perspective that came out of that as well, having that perspective of being enlisted for two, three, four, five years, and then going to a service academy, and then their background before that. It just contributed to a really diverse group of people, particularly as compared to what I grew up with.

Alexis Robertson:

Yeah, it really sounds like you view life before the Air Force Academy versus life after. Maybe I'm wrong in interpretation of that.

Patrick McMahon:

To a certain extent. I don't want it to seem like I was completely sheltered as a kid or my parents kept me with blinders on the whole time, but again, it was just a product of growing up in the northwest suburbs of Chicago. I think a lot of that is probably pretty similar today. I don't think Arlington Heights looks terribly different than it did when I was a kid, bigger, but I think demographics haven't changed too much.

Alexis Robertson:

So what was that like? I think you've done more than allude to it. You go through that process. You do go to the Air Force Academy. You show up. I'm assuming at that point you didn't know

that you were going to go on to law school. Maybe I'm wrong. But what did you want to accomplish at the Air Force Academy? What was the plan?

Patrick McMahon:

Well, the first step was just get through my first year, because I didn't know anything about the military, and you need to know a lot about the military to do well that first year at the academy. There's a lot of, for lack of a better term, I'm just going to call it hazing. It's a lot of rites of passage, physical training, mental training, on top of what I'm going to say is a fairly rigorous academic curriculum. I had an engineering class every semester I was there, and I was a biology pre-med major. I had no desire to do anything along the lines of engineering, but I was taking aeronautical engineering, astronautical engineering, like satellites and orbits and things like that, two semesters of physics, things that I just wanted nothing to do with, but the idea was to spit out these well-rounded officers, so we had these really broad curriculums. Then on the military side, you also had to just learn basic stuff like ranks and how to march and different regulations, and you had to memorize different planes and their armaments, and all the while maybe doing push-ups for an hour. It was an idea of stressing your brain and your body at the same time.

Patrick McMahon:

Through that process, I tell you, I learned a lot about my limits, how to handle stress, not to sweat the small stuff, and I think, really importantly, teamwork. You start out as a freshman and you're the recipient of all this attention, but then as you're a sophomore, junior, senior, you're on the other side and you're the one doing the training. You get the chance to put the freshmen through a difficult first year, but you learn some of these tricks, and the idea of maybe picking out one of the weaker people in the group, not to make it harder for that person that's weaker, but for everybody to realize that we need to band together to get through whatever this situation may be and overcome this obstacle. That teamwork aspect is something that I really value and something that I like to try to bring in even today. It's not a one-for-one trade-off, but I like working on teams. I know that, through experiences like that, I have my own weaknesses, and the idea is to find people that can complement those weaknesses with their strengths, and vice-versa.

Alexis Robertson:

Yeah, I'm really out of my depth here in many ways in this discussion. I don't have any real close family members in the military, but where I've started to pick up more information about the military is actually through my interest in well-being, teamwork, and basically human optimization, whether it be books or podcasts. Frequently, they will talk about the way the military breaks people down, I guess is one way to put it, but really to figure out how you work,

particularly through sleep deprivation and just learning how, when things are not ideal for you, how do you function? I don't mean this in a negative way. It's actually really, really fascinating.

Patrick McMahon:  
It's accurate.

Alexis Robertson:

Yeah, and also just what we can learn about teams and teamwork. You can help me out here, but frankly, there's a tremendous amount of emotional intelligence happening in the military with how people work together. I have not finished it yet, but I picked up Stanley McChrystal's *Team of Teams*, because these are all things that I think we can be using in the workplace.

Patrick McMahon:

To get back to your first point about breaking down to build you up, that is a lot of the first year, is that you are given these tasks over and over again and put in stressful situations and asked to perform. Sometimes these tasks are, frankly, impossible. We would do it on the other side. We would ask people to do stuff that we'd know that they would not be able to do at that time, and that's in more of the tearing-down part. Then, as you advance, some of the more difficult tasks are now attainable, and then you maybe show them a way of attaining those goals in the building-up phase, so you're no longer giving these impossible tasks. You're giving difficult tasks, but no longer impossible, and you have learned some lessons along the way in how to accomplish them.

Patrick McMahon:

It's through accomplishing those goals one by one on the building-up part that really, on the other side, you emerge with this confidence that you didn't have originally. What might seem an insurmountable obstacle in the front end, now you're not going to just dismiss it. You're going to think, "How do I get around this? How can I tackle this?" I still find myself approaching some problems today the same way.

Alexis Robertson:

Yeah, that makes sense to me.

Patrick McMahon:

Something that can seem overwhelming at first, "Well, I've been through tough stuff before. I'm going to figure out a way to get around this."

Alexis Robertson:



The more that I learn about the military and some of the tactics used, I think, as an outsider, you think it's all about physical strength of some sort. You think of Navy BUDS training or something. But I've really come to learn that that physical, sure, it's there and it's important, but so much of it is mental in the way they're prepping the mind and the mindset. You mentioned there's so much you're learning your first year, but you knew at that point... I think you mentioned you're pre-med with a biology focus. So what happened? Did you keep with that path, or what happened next?

Patrick McMahon:

It was my junior year, I think. I had been in the biology department, in that major the whole time. I had started in on the pre-med part of it, so I had taken a couple semesters of organic chemistry and the lab associated with, to this day was probably... I have regrets about doing that. It was an anatomy course that I was taking, human anatomy, and we were working on cadavers, had my hands inside of Jane Doe working on her abdominal muscles and just doing that. I wasn't passing out or anything like that, but I don't really love this and it's not a great feeling that I have right now. And if this is how I feel right now, where am I going to be when I'm two, three years into medical school really committed? Not only committed just to medical school, but I imagine also having the Air Force pay for it, which adds to a commitment to stay in the service. You have to be pretty sure about pursuing that.

Patrick McMahon:

I just decided that it wasn't right for me. I liked the department, I really liked the teacher and my professors that I had out there, so I stuck with it, and that was my ultimate degree. But I just decided at that point that I need to explore elsewhere. My father is an attorney. I'm not going to say that he is the reason that I went into law, but the way that he approached his career and then also was a father and a husband showed me that there was a really good way to have a fulfilling career, provide for your family, and be present on that path.

Patrick McMahon:

I decided to explore that, really also with an undertone that I relished being in a position where somebody would have to come to me and really put their full trust in whatever I'm going to do. I'm not going to equate it with being in medicine, where your life could literally be on the line. I'm dealing in labor and employment law now and in the general commercial litigation, contract disputes, things like that, so it's not on that same level. But there is a level of "I have this problem. I'm coming to you as my attorney. I don't know how to fix it, but I need you to fix it for me. I'm going to trust you to do everything that we can for the best result." There's that level of trust there that I like. Trusted advisor role is really something that I want to be and something I'm always working towards.

Patrick McMahon:

That just seemed like a route that I wanted to go down, and so I looked at some electives that had to do with undergrad pre-law kind of classes. I wanted to take the least "sexy" course. I wanted to take something really dry. I didn't want to take public speaking, where I'd be like, "Oh, this is what I'm going to do every day as a lawyer." I took legal research and reasoning, which was essentially how to Westlaw, a semester of that, if you can believe that.

Alexis Robertson:

Yeah, in undergrad, essentially. Didn't know that was a thing.

Patrick McMahon:

Maybe it is now, I don't know, but it was then. I remember that was the first time I ever went on Westlaw, during that course, and just had some really basic legal research assignments over the course of the semester, and a little bit of writing and really just summarizing whatever cases you found. To the extent you can be good at it at that point, I found that I was, and I found out that I didn't hate it. I enjoyed the idea of the advocacy piece of it. At that point, I resigned that law was going to be my next step, but it's a little more complicated coming out of the Air Force Academy.

Alexis Robertson:

I was going to say, as far as I know, you didn't just jump straight to law school. Then what happened?

Patrick McMahon:

There are some routes you can go down for scholarships, but at that point that ship had kind of sailed for me. As an academy graduate, you owe at least five years of service afterwards. If you fly, that bumps up to 10 or 11 years, just because of the cost of pilot training. It costs \$2 or \$3 million to put somebody through pilot training, and they're not going to let that walk out the door as soon as you're done.

Alexis Robertson:

Right. When you said "if you fly," I was thinking airplane, right?

Patrick McMahon:

Yeah. I did not fly. I flew desk. I went into communications. The reason I chose communications... I should say communications is basically all things you would think you would use to communicate with, but just by its nature and technology, it's largely IT related. Every

base has a communications squadron, so I knew I wouldn't be limiting myself geographically if I went down the communications route. There are a lot of rough Air Force bases out there, and being from the city, I didn't want to be stationed up in North Dakota. No offense to any of the North Dakotans that may be listening right now, but not my cup of tea. I was hoping to be somewhat near a city, so I started looking at bases and really just looking at a map.

Patrick McMahon:

Having never lived on the East Coast before, I was looking on the East Coast, and not appreciating geographical differences on the East Coast, one of the bases I listed was Dover Air Force Base, Delaware. That was the base they gave me. Turns out, Dover is not that close to D.C., Baltimore, and Philly. It's about an hour and a half or two hours, so don't let the map deceive you. That was my start as an officer afterwards, and that was my beginning as a communications officer for the next, ended up being six years.

Alexis Robertson:

What does that mean? What does a communications officer do?

Patrick McMahon:

Well, that's another cool part about coming out of an academy and being an officer right away. I walked into the Dover communications squadron, the 436 Communications Squadron at Dover, and I was a flight commander for a small... Well, I wasn't a flight commander initially, but near that. Essentially, I was in charge of 10 to 15 people, anywhere from 18 years old to 40, and I'm 22 years old. It's weird having somebody that age call you "sir," but that's just the nature of ranks. It gets back to the demographics and the split-up of officers to enlisted I was talking about earlier.

Patrick McMahon:

You're essentially put into a leadership role right out the gate. You have a team. You have to manage and lead them effectively. I will say that there is I think a big difference that often gets overlooked between leadership and management. The leadership part is something that I really wanted to focus on, and really having your team that will follow you and trust you and respects you. I think a lot of people can manage; I don't think as many people are as good at leading. The leadership is really something you have to work on. It even goes back to the academy. They call it a leadership lab, because as you went up through your years at the academy, you had more and more responsibility, which set you up nicely to start out as a young officer and have some people that are not just "college students" that are reporting to you.

Alexis Robertson:

Can you tell me... You just said a little bit, but just to state it even more clearly, what's the difference between leading and managing?

Patrick McMahon:

Managing, you have a task, you need to get it done. A to B, how do we do it? You can set all things aside, and the people don't matter. It's just a warm body. Get it done. Doesn't matter the level of respect you show for people, don't need to be inspiring, but you can just get the task completed. Then for the levels above you in management, whatever management level you're at, they might not even notice or care how it gets done. They don't care how the sausage gets made.

Patrick McMahon:

Leadership, I think, is more about developing relationships, and I think the leadership side fosters growth in an organization, and that you have that mutual trust between leader and subordinate. They're not afraid of you, to come with new ideas or maybe present opposing viewpoints, in a respectful manner, obviously. Again, it gets back to that growth, not only from maybe an operational perspective, but also from cultural perspective. If people work in an environment with a strong leader, and strong does not necessarily mean heavy-handed, but somebody that is a clearly defined leader. I think there's a level of comfort there, that they can express their viewpoints.

Alexis Robertson:

I ask because I think in large law firms, the industry, and maybe in large corporations, but I'll stick with large law firms, oftentimes what we see are partners who are essentially, they're managers, but they tend to often be project managers versus people managers. When I say that, I'm new to Foley, I'm not commenting on Foley & Lardner, but I think it's something that, in terms of my focus with diversity and inclusion, is really changing structures so that that leadership and development of humans is valued versus project management of tasks for clients. I just really appreciate you elaborating on that.

Alexis Robertson:

Although, I did also want to ask, you're at this base in Dover, but I want to know specifically what you were doing. Is it helping planes land? What are you doing there?

Patrick McMahon:

Well, it depended on the different... The squadron is the communications squadron, and there was individual flights within it. One flight would be responsible for the IT backbone. That would

be internet, computers, that kind of stuff, telephones on the base. Another flight would be responsible for the radios, radar, things like that on the air field. I touched a little bit in both.

Patrick McMahon:

When I went over to the air field side, I was in a separate building away from my commander, had my own little group of people over there. I think that's the time where I got a chance to really just take the reins a little bit more as far as leading my own little group. When I was on the IT side of things, it's the same building that the commander is in. The commander was around all the time. He was a great guy, but a lot of that stuff I'm just kind of in the middle. Really, when I'm off literally on the other side of the base with my team, we have our own interactions throughout the day, and that was a more rewarding experience than the initial spot.

Alexis Robertson:

Well, as you said, that's a tremendous amount of experience for someone at 22. Also, I'm going to jump you ahead a little bit because we probably only have about 10 more minutes together. From photos, it looks to me like you didn't spend the whole six years in Dover.

Patrick McMahon:

Yeah. Mostly, it was on the East Coast, so three years in Dover and three years in Boston. Those were my two main bases. Boston was great. Also, had a lot of TDYs, temporary duties, as I was there. Spent some time in the Deep South, southern Alabama, Mississippi. Talk about more cultural exposure there. Alaska. Springfield, Illinois. Syracuse, New York. All these random spots just for little pieces of time. Spent probably about three total months in Germany working at a base out there.

Patrick McMahon:

Then I was deployed for about six and a half, seven months in the Middle East working primarily out of an Army base, Camp Arifjan. I went out there thinking I was going to be the communications officer for this unit I was joining. It was a joint unit too, so it was not just Air Force. It was Air Force, Navy, Army. But I got out there, and the aide-de-camp, fancy name for I'm going to call it personal assistant, even though it's a little demeaning, for the general that was... The two-star general out there was outgoing, and they needed a new young officer to fill that, so I was a first lieutenant, just about to put on captain at the time. I actually did get promoted to captain while I was there, which was kind of cool.

Patrick McMahon:

I ended up being the aide-de-camp for this two-star general out there, who, oddly enough, was Major General Robert McMahon, same spelling as me, tall, thin guy, led to some pretty

interesting interactions during the six or seven months I had with him. We were mostly in Kuwait, but he was a two-star general and he was in charge of logistics, for essentially trying to streamline logistics in and out of the theater. I was a communications officer, did not know much about logistics, but it didn't really matter in that job because I was his calendar guy, I was his gatekeeper as far as who was coming in and out of his office, I was his security, so I was carrying guns and things like that while I was over there, and wherever he went, I went.

Patrick McMahon:

We went to Qatar, Jordan, Iraq, Afghanistan, several different spots while we were over there. My only private jet experience in my life really getting to take... I mean, they're military jets, so don't get too excited. Nonetheless, it's kind of cool. I would drive up in the Suburban onto the tarmac, and then we'd just drive right up to the plane, hop out, throw the keys to somebody, hop in the plane, and we're off.

Patrick McMahon:

More cultural exposure, let me tell you, anywhere from driving through Kabul at 2:00 in the morning, something I never thought I'd do in my life, and then going to Jordan to meet with a Jordanian merchant that was essentially trying to convince us to bring in more goods through Jordan, and staying in a resort hotel room out there in the middle of deployment, where I'm typically in the desert and in a military base the whole time. It was a radical change just in the middle there.

Patrick McMahon:

It was a pretty wild six or seven months. Fortunately, nothing too hairy happened. I wasn't taking fire or anything like that, so in that respect I was very lucky. It was a really great six or seven months. When you see so much on the news, particularly around that time, as far as what was going on in the Middle East, it was nice to actually be over there and see it firsthand and get some perspective on the ground. But that was my one and only deployment there, and the rest of the time was stateside.

Alexis Robertson:

It's a lot for me to not ask all kinds of follow-up about all of the things you just raised, but I'm not. What I'm going to say is that was a part of the six years, and then you were able to go to law school.

Patrick McMahon:

Yeah. That last year, I was maybe going to get out after five, but I knew I wasn't going to deploy again. I liked Boston, and I wasn't particularly in a rush to get off to law school. So I spent that

last year, one more year in Boston, took the LSAT. Probably should've taken the LSAT a little more seriously than I did. As far as the law school plan, I was either going to go to the "T14," and if that dream didn't come true, which it did not, I would come back to Chicago and go to the best option for me here. Ultimately, that ended up being DePaul, and I'll just say that it got me where I wanted to be.

Patrick McMahon:

Never thought I would end up at a big law firm. I just never thought it was for me. I had this view of... Maybe this gets to some of the advice for law students thing, but I never thought at the time that the big law atmosphere was something I wanted. I had this view of what it was and just burning the candle at both ends, at the exclusion of any kind of social or family life. I think to some people that ends up being a reality, but I don't think it has to be either.

Alexis Robertson:

How did Foley & Lardner come onto the scene while you were in law school?

Patrick McMahon:

I'm just going to say this right now. Throughout my career to this point, I think I've always had the mentality of try to keep as many doors open as I can and walk through the one that's the most appealing. In law school, I was focused on IP. I was looking at IP law and took IP classes. My first summer was at an IP litigation firm. After my first year, there was this IP fair that I think Loyola hosts.

Alexis Robertson:

It's where you interview, essentially.

Patrick McMahon:

Yeah. It's an Embassy Suites. It is full of law firms from across the country. They all come to Chicago, and you just interview with a bunch of law firms if you have the mutual interest. You'll bid, and if the bid is reciprocated, it just brings everybody together so you can do all these different law firms at once. I came in, and one of the firms that I interviewed with was Foley, again, for an IP slot. Interview went well, got a call back, came in, I had some interviews here in the office. One I distinctly remember was with Bill McKenna, it was great, a really great guy, and Aaron Tantleff, who was somebody I was going to be working with, because they thought my background, communications and the Air Force, lined up nicely with the IT side and a lot of the IT stuff that Aaron deals with in this IT technology and transactions group.

Patrick McMahon:

So I came in and started that, accepted the offer for Foley really before I did any kind of OCIs or anything like that, just because it seemed like a great fit and I wanted to explore it. Started at Foley that next summer, really with a focus on being in that group. For whatever reason, it just didn't seem to be a great fit. It wasn't even just Foley. It was just even throughout my second year and working more and more with patents and IT, I just didn't love it. The idea of staring at patents all day, God bless the people that do, but it just wasn't my bag.

Alexis Robertson:

I'm thinking, did it give you the same feeling as when you had your hands inside a cadaver, or was it a little different?

Patrick McMahon:

Yeah, well, maybe not such a visceral feeling, but just knowing that this might not be the path for me. And again, to Foley's credit, when I got here that summer, I expressed about probably three weeks in that I'd like to try some other stuff. I'd like to try some litigation stuff. That's more what I picture myself doing as an attorney, advocating and being in that litigation atmosphere. They said, "Sure, let's see what we can do."

Patrick McMahon:

I started working with some of the people in litigation. I started working with John Litchfield and Chris Ward, kind of just a product of circumstance. We went to a Cubs game one night, and John and Chris were both there. We got to talking. John's younger brother is one of my brother's best friends. John had been working with Chris a lot in labor and employment, obviously, and it just led to us doing some projects together, and then me being exposed to labor and employment law, really, for the first time. It just worked out that way. I didn't have a set plan there. I didn't have an agenda.

Alexis Robertson:

Well, that's one of my favorite parts. I think that's how it is for a lot of people professionally. I mentioned how we are getting a fair amount of law students who listen to this, and that's why I think this is a powerful discussion, because they can hear most of us don't set out at 18 and have this straight line to what we're going to be doing when we're 35, 45, 55. We try to, but that line ends up going all over the place. A lot of times, it's one of those "this thing just happened, and it worked out."

Patrick McMahon:



Yeah, two things. Again, trying to keep as many doors open as you can. The other is, don't pretend like you have it all figured out before you even really got started. Don't be upset if the path doesn't match up to the one you thought you might've had in your head.

Alexis Robertson:

Exactly, because that's the real path. The head path is the made-up one. Tell me a little bit about your practice. What's your day-to-day like? What sort of matters do you work on?

Patrick McMahon:

Like I said, I fully became a primary member of the labor and employment group last August, but it wasn't a sea change for me. I had been doing a lot of labor and employment work up to that point. It's just the first few years, at Foley at least, they like to keep you... You have the ability to explore other areas within your practice group.

Patrick McMahon:

Now I do a lot of... I still do a lot of litigation, both in and out of labor and employment. I'm trying to do more and more counseling now. If an issue comes up with an employee for a client, they'll give us a call. We can give some ideas of how to best handle that situation short of litigation. I work with a lot of agencies that are responsible for labor and employment laws, Illinois Department of Human Rights or similar agencies throughout the United States, and responding to different individual employment charges that may have been filed there.

Patrick McMahon:

Then, like I said, I still have my hands in a few litigation matters. I have two litigation matters right now, one is going to be increasingly busy and one is very busy right now, that I've been on since I was a first year. It's one of these gifts that keeps on giving.

Alexis Robertson:

I know that life. That used to be my former life. I'm aware.

Patrick McMahon:

But it's also interesting, too, because I've gotten to grow with the cases. I literally was working on this one case helping on the legal research to draft the complaint when I was a first year, that summer. Now I am the primary client contact, and I argued a motion for summary judgment on it this year. I've been doing all the drafting. The associate that I had been working with at the time is now a partner, so I'm the only associate on the case. As the case went along, more opportunities came my way and I was able to, to the credit of these partners working with me, allowing me to take those opportunities as new experiences. I really appreciated that trust, and

still do. It's fun to see that growth of your career along with a case, even if it is a case that just seems like it just doesn't want to go away for five years.

Alexis Robertson:

As we wind down here, I am wondering, how has your military experience translated into you as a lawyer? Do you find it valuable?

Patrick McMahon:

Yeah, I think so, for a few reasons. One, I think, is the teamwork aspect that we referred to and talked about earlier. I like working on teams. Now, Foley tries to, for the benefit of their clients, to keep things fairly lean here, so you don't get on huge teams necessarily. Even still, working in a group of three, four people, there's still that idea of teamwork and collaboration. Even right now, even though we can't sit in the same room together, I still feel like we can do that. I would obviously rather be in the same room as people I like walking around, but I like the teamwork and I like the ability to work on teams here.

Patrick McMahon:

I think the other lesson is just in resilience and being able to take on, again, situations that you think might be overwhelming at first and being able to hash it out on a step-by-step basis in how you'll be able to accomplish or get over that obstacle. I guess, particularly in a time like right now, when I think we all just have this feeling in the back of our head of uncertainty, being able to just get past that and accept the situation for what it is, we still have to get something done, let's figure out a way to get there, and not just be overwhelmed by the situation and everything surrounding what you need to accomplish, but really just focus on, "All right, all that's there. I can't control it. How do we get this done?"

Alexis Robertson:

That's invaluable. What you just said right there, that's major.

Patrick McMahon:

Right. I think we all can, and I think most of us do. Maybe we don't do it in a conscious way. If you don't feel like you can, then we go back to the teamwork, because you've got a team. Then it gets back to leadership. Do you have a leader that you can trust and you can express these feelings to? It all kind of ties together.

Alexis Robertson:

Well, and as you said when we started, before we started recording, I commented that you were right on time, and you said, "I guess that's the military," so you definitely bring that forward. And when-

Patrick McMahon:

Well, there will be some people that said I've been late before, don't worry.

Alexis Robertson:

Well, I mentioned also that you were a co-chair of the firm's Veterans & Allies Affinity Group, and also whenever we have calls for that group, everybody is very prompt, so I appreciate that as well.

Patrick McMahon:

Yeah. I'll give a plug for that right now too. That was something that did not exist when I started at Foley. I spoke on a panel at Northwestern with some other veterans in big law. They mentioned they had these groups, and I knew Foley didn't have one. So I came back, and I think I spoke with Rebecca Bradley about it when I first got back. She was working in recruiting at the time. She was just somebody that I had known since I was a summer, and I thought she might have the right connection. She hooked me up with the right people, and I think within the next few months it was something that we were able to get together. Obviously, we're still trying to get it off the ground, but certainly a step in the right direction. I'm thankful that Foley saw it as a worthy cause.

Alexis Robertson:

Yeah. Well, and we appreciate your leadership there. I'll say, as we're wrapping things up, I do like to give every guest an opportunity to share some words of advice or reflections, whether that be to current law students or maybe to your former self who was about to navigate this four years at the Air Force Academy, six years serving, and then law school. What are your thoughts or reflections, your advice you would give somebody who's looking at becoming a lawyer?

Patrick McMahon:

Yeah, I think it's a lot of the themes we talked about already. One of the sayings in the Air Force is "flexibility is the key to air power," but flexibility is the key to a lot of things. Being adaptable and being willing to take on new situations and step out of your comfort zone are, I think, invaluable at a micro level, so taking on an assignment that you think you're getting out over your skis a little bit, or on a macro level and stepping into a career that might be a little bit of a risk at first and you don't know how it's going to pan out. I think being adaptable and being willing to take on some risks are key.

Alexis Robertson:

Thanks. I think that's fantastic advice. The final question, if someone wants to get in touch with you, best way to find you, Foley's website?

Patrick McMahon:

Yeah, I think so. Yeah. I think my email is there, so go ahead and reach out. I'm happy to talk.

Alexis Robertson:

Awesome. Well, thank you so much for joining me. I'll talk to you later, Patrick.

Patrick McMahon:

Thanks, Alexis.

Alexis Robertson:

Thank you for listening to The Path and the Practice. I hope you enjoyed the conversation and join us again next time. If you did enjoy it, please share it, subscribe, and leave us a review, as your feedback on the podcast is important to us.

Alexis Robertson:

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