Eric Vollmecke

Two Sides of Service

On the wide-open plains of Missouri, vast swaths of American farmland stretch out in all directions to meet unending blue sky above. If you were to look down from your seat in an airplane — or from the basket of a hot-air balloon—you would see a meticulous patchwork of green, brown, and golden squares and circles interlaced with the delicate stitchings of interstate highways, irrigation streams, and access roads. You might squint your eyes and focus to see tiny cars, trucks and tractors inching their way across the ground. And if you

were flying over Missouri in the summer days of the mid-1970's, you would be passing over a 14-year-old Eric Vollmecke working on the ranch of Charles Shaw, a World War II veteran who had been shot down in a B-17 Bombardier in his last mission.

Before he was a decorated Air Force pilot, a retired 2-star Major General, or the President of SENGEX, a leading large scale cyber and physical threat detection and mitigation company, Eric was a

Midwestern kid with a steadfast work ethic and an empathic appreciation for other people's experiences. "Working on the Shaw ranch was one of the best times of my life," he remembers today. "It was the picture of true Americana. There were twenty or so of us, among the horse troughs, icing down with Coca-Colas after work. It's even where I learned to drink beer! We'd work until all the hay was up and sometimes that would be 'till one in the morning. You'd get through with it and have such a sense of satisfaction and accomplishment."

Eric's time on the ranch instilled in him the core values that he would carry with him throughout his life: the value of hard work, the satisfaction of a job well done, the joy of living and working within a community, the desire to learn from others' experiences, and the call to service. "I felt very fortunate to know the other people he had working on the ranch," he says "They were all

willing to share their experiences, and I soaked it up. Many of them had served in World War II, and as I got to know them, it really gave me the sense that we all owe something to this country."

As the president of SENGEX, Eric gives back today by focusing his energy and knowledge into leading a productive, profitable, and innovative security company that provides turnkey Engineering and Systems Integration solutions to customers across the medical device, wireless device, unmanned aerial vehicle, and

weapons space. "I have a passion for technology and doing new things," Eric says. "Through my Air Force experience, I had the opportunity to shape some major programs and adopt new technologies, and SENGEX leverages that DOD expertise into adjacent markets by focusing on technologies that deal with threat detections."

SENGEX was formed in 2011 by Hans Schmidt, Eric's close friend and fellow Air Force officer, with the idea of providing high-end

engineering and integration support to the government. Eric and Hans's relationship dates back to the early 1980s, when they were young, promising officers randomly assigned to the same communications group at the Pentagon. "As lieutenants, we were dealing with millions of dollars of programs impacting the whole Air Force, which is virtually unheard of," Eric recounts. "Normally, those responsibilities would have been assigned to much more senior officers, but because nobody above us had the expertise, they gave the new and unique projects to us. Both Hans and I look back on that as a really unique and defining experience. If we had been communications officers at any other base, there would have been no way we would have had that level of responsibility, but it was pivotal in giving us the experience and insight we draw on in our company today."



At its inception, SENGEX was headed up by retired Brigadier General Meinecke, who served with Hans and Eric. Eric began his tenure at SENGEX as a director, and became president in 2017 after retiring from the Air Force as a two-star Major General. "We've certainly gone through lean times, but even with small budgets, we've still managed to grow," he says. "I believe it's because half our team has military experience working in weapons, and the other half have commercial experience and work in the high-tech, startup world. In the collegial and open culture of our company, their skill sets complement one another very well and combine to create a tour de force. We're a lean staff of about fifteen, and every single person is A-team."

SENGEX has always been set apart by its capacity for continuity and agility. Eric's innovative leadership and forward-thinking entrepreneurialism have also been key, ushering the company into the medical field that now accounts for half of its commercial business. "I decided to drive the medical space when I began observing and learning from others that the operating room is adopting a lot of the same tech as an aircraft carrier, doing more with less," he explains. "I anticipate we will continue to grow substantially in that space."

Eric's ability to listen and absorb the insight of others has helped him at every step in his journey, even at its very beginning. Though Eric was born in Washington, DC, and spent a portion of his childhood in Indianapolis and New Jersey for his father's sales job, Missouri was his home. Even as a boy, he sought out and thrived in close-knit communities of diverse experience and points of view. "I have fond memories of the neighborhoods I grew up in and how close everyone was," he recounts. "It was a place that always felt comfortable-the kind of place where you always help neighbors and support each other. It taught me that people will give you the most valuable thing that they have, free of charge. It's the benefit of their experience and wisdom, and all you have to do is ask."

The grandchild of immigrants, son of talented and hard-working parents, and brother of a fellow Major General, Eric comes from a line of Midwesterners, veterans, and entrepreneurial spirits. But most of all, he comes from a long line of aviators and adventurers. Eric's grandfather was an aircraft designer who immigrated from

Germany to the United States in 1927 and settled in Little Rock, Arkansas, where he became the chief engineer at Command-Aire, one of the country's leading manufacturers of small airplanes. There, he designed an aircraft that won the 1930 National Air Race, and after a distinguished career at the Civil Aeronautics Authority and later NASA, was inducted into the Arkansas Hall of Fame in 1983.

Eric's father, a Korean War veteran who later attended American University on the GI bill and eventually went on to become a Fortune 500 executive, also felt a call to the sky. In the Air Force, he served as an F-86 jet pilot working for the Wing Commander, and later became an accomplished amateur hot-air balloonist. In watching his father gracefully manage the challenges and pressure of being a sales executive, Eric learned how to work hard and stay poised as a professional. "I really admired how he was able to handle the stress," he recounts.

Just as important as the value of being a good citizen and hard worker, however, Eric's father taught him to have a sense of adventure. "My father was a big outdoorsman, and when he was in college, he would volunteer to fight forest fires," Eric says. "When I was in high school, he got into hot air balloons, and started competing across the country. My friends and I would go up with him, and since this was before cell phones, it wasn't always easy. Once, he crossed the Missouri River, and I had to drive fifty miles to cross the closest bridge hoping to find him before nightfall. It was tough, but it was worth it. My father helped me grow into an adventurous, entrepreneurial, hardworking person, which has shaped everything I've done in life. Now, when I take on a job, there always has to be an aspect of adventure to itsomething bigger than the task at hand."

Eric's mother, as well, was fundamental in helping him fly because she believed he could go anywhere in life. As a kid, he was shy and very afraid of public speaking, but his mother was an excellent communicator. "She was the most well-read and articulate person I've ever met," he affirms. "Later on in life, when I'd have to speak to audiences of thousands of people, I would think about her and draw on that inspiration."

Growing up, Eric focused on individual sports like cross country and track, where his talent was strongest. He made his first buck shoveling driveways, and the family always made

a point to have dinner together. He loved backpacking and mountaineering, and was also a good student, aspiring to pursue higher education through military service. As he neared graduation, he reflected back on a family vacation to Charleston, South Carolina, when he was thirteen. "When we went to see the parade at the Citadel, he was hooked," he recounts. "I got an Air Force scholarship through ROTC and enrolled there for college, embarking on the most transformative four years of my life."

Through that first year, with its strict code of conduct and rigid lifestyle, Eric questioned his choice all the time. "The Citadel offered unparalleled education and training, but it wasn't necessarily easy!"" he says. Amidst the challenges, Eric found his way through by employing the same skills that allowed him to make the most of his experience on the Shaw ranch, watching and learning from the many mentors and role models the school had to offer. "I had all these amazing leaders around me, and a few were real anchors for me, like my history professor, Captain Cousins," he remembers. "He saw something in me and was the one who told me I had an ability to go far in life. Others made an impression on me through their tough lessons. Those guys knew how to mold men."

After his graduation from the Citadel, Eric went to communications school, and was able to then leverage his Citadel education to forego officer training to be placed directly in the unique position at the Pentagon with Hans Schmidt. Yet through all of his successes in his early military career, a piece of the puzzle was missing. His and father grandfather were successful businessmen, and they had instilled in Eric an entrepreneurial spirit, but he had yet to find a way to balance a life of service with his business goals. "As I child," Eric remembers, "I always thought I would go into the military and do my part. But I also knew that I could follow my father's path into the corporate world." At the Citadel, Eric's mentors persuaded him against a business major in favor of mathematics. The degree helped him secure a foothold into prestigious postings, like the one at the Pentagon, but meant he would have to table his entrepreneurial dreams for the time being.

During his time in active duty, at the event honoring his grandfather's induction into the Arkansas Hall of Fame, Eric happened to cross paths with Major General Wilson, Commander of the Air National Guard. The man made an indelible impression on Eric, changing the course of his life in a monumental way. "I had already been commissioned and was on active duty, but I really had no idea about serving in the reserves with the Air National Guard," Eric explains. "Commander Wilson was the one who showed me that I could do both things together, and he became a role model to me. I realized for the first time that I could be anchored in the community as a business leader, while also doing all of the neat things the Air Force does to support the country." With the understanding that he could pursue two sides of service, both in the military and in business, Eric set his sights on making that dream a reality.

The late 1980's and the first year of the 90's were a busy time for Eric as he earned his pilot's wings, joined the West Virginia Air National Guard, started working at GE Aerospace, and met a remarkable woman named Sigrid. They were married in April of 1990, and Sigrid took to Eric's Reserve status with immediacy and vigor. "In June of 1990, she went on an orientation flight and came home with a stack of books," he recalls. "It was all briefing materials she had to know in case I was ever activated." Two months later, Eric received a call from his squadron commander. "I'm glad you picked up," came the voice over the phone. "You've been activated, and you report tomorrow at 0400 hours."

Over the next decade, Eric flew all over the world, serving and supporting Air Force missions wherever he was needed. "All of these missions required a lot of support from my type of aircraft, the C-130, so I was always doing more," Eric said. "I was usually doing about six weeks a year in support of deployments." All the while, through the 1990s, Eric fulfilled his responsibilities to his various employers, drawing on the skills he had cultivated watching his own father manage responsibility.

Then, like so many Americans, his life was changed forever on the morning of September 11, 2001. Once again, he felt the call to service as he and the other reservist pilots in the Air National Guard were activated to support some of the most crucial missions in Afghanistan and Iraq. By 2003, Eric had gone from Lieutenant Colonel to Colonel, and then to a 1-Star General. "You don't get General because of what you've done," he says.

"You get General because of what people believe you can do."

That belief in the constitution of Eric's character was affirmed by his leadership during a tour in Kandahar, Afghanistan, with the 173rd Airborne Brigade. At the tour's end in 2005, Commander Colonel Owens surprised him with the gift of a bayonet signed by every member of the brigade. "He told me that, before I got there, the brigade was business-as-usual, with members of the team off doing their own thing," Eric recalls. "But once I took command, they all truly felt that I made it clear through my actions that the Air Force was there to support them as aggressively as they needed." The feelings of service, camaraderie, and accomplishment that he had felt all those years ago working on Mr. Shaw's ranch came flooding back, ten-fold, in that conference room in Afghanistan. "I walked out of there knowing that I'd done a good job, and that meant the world to me," Eric says. "I later got a Bronze Star for that service, but it was nothing compared to that moment of those guys looking me in the eye, telling me I'd made a difference to them. It's a sense of accomplishment that you only get once in a lifetime."

Just like his history professor so many years ago at the Citadel, Eric's Air Force colleagues continued to see great things in him, and he was promoted up the ranks. In late 2012, he was awarded his second star, the highest rank that a reservist can achieve. He was selected to be the Air National Guard advisor at the United States Air Forces in Europe – Air Forces Africa base in Ramstein, Germany, supporting air and space operations across Europe, Africa, and Asia.

Eric's time in the Air Force and the Air National Guard brought him to the cutting edge of technological breakthroughs. "When I was first in the Air Staff, probably everybody at that table had pilot wings on them, and almost all of them were fighter pilots," he recounts. "But when I was a One-Star General, only four of us who had wings were fighter pilots. The other wings were wings that did not exist like cyber, and new career fields that have evolved in the Air Force. It showed me that we truly are an adaptive organization, and that what they truly wanted out of their Generals was resilience. They wanted people who would shape the future." With that, Eric leveraged his experience in the Air Force, a strong, adaptive, and forward-looking organization, and focused on making SENGEX a powerful and agile company on the other side of service.

Whether he was supporting his father on a ballooning expedition, the Pentagon on new communications technology, a brigade Kandahar, or a boardroom of executives, Eric has established his own brand of leadership rooted in service to others. "I believe in leadership by example," he says. "I also believe that followership is part of leadership. If you become a really good follower, you can transition into leadership roles more effectively. As a leader, I've always tried to focus on supporting others, and I try to instill that into the people who work

At the core of Eric's life is his wife, Sigrid and their five children. "Sigrid is a true anchor," he says. "She's complementary, engaging, a terrific mom, and has tons of energy." Though he's spent much of his life in the air and traveling the world, Eric and Sigrid have managed to build an unshakeable foundation with his family and neighborhood. "I don't think I could put a dollar amount on the sense of closeness and friendship we share with our neighbors," he says. "I'm thankful that my kids get to experience the same sense of community I had growing up in Missouri."

In advising young people entering the working world today, Eric reminds us that leadership and success aren't always about being the one in front. Rather, it's about communities built through openness, conversation, and connection. "I feel the one thing that has separated me from others along the way is that I've listened to the people around me," he affirms. "I've approached them and sought their advice. They appreciated me asking for that, and it's made me a much better person through learning and adapting the best qualities they've shared." Indeed, with the advice, ideas, and wisdom, of others, Eric did more than embrace two sides of service—he built himself.

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