

Last month, the Young Aviators received a very special gift from F-16 pilot and Air Force Captain Tyler 'Iron' McBride. The flag flew in his F-16 over Afghanistan during a combat mission in December, and what's even cooler and more inspiring than the flag's journey over the battlefields and back to the US, is Tyler's personal journey to become one of America's elite pilots. I am proud to tell you his story and to call him my friend. ~ Eric Serani

Tyler was born with a rare condition called lobar emphysema, which led to two partial lung removal procedures, or lobectomies. Weeks after he was born, Tyler was missing a significant portion of one of his lungs. One would think that would severely hinder him for the rest of his life, but that couldn't be further from the truth.

I met Tyler in 9<sup>th</sup> grade where we were both on the freshman football team at Broomfield High School. I had known most of my teammates from little league, but Tyler was a new face as he transferred from Thornton. He tried out for quarterback and quickly showed everyone that he played at a much higher level than the rest. His athletic abilities weren't limited to football as he also went on to become a star baseball and basketball player for Broomfield. Nobody would have ever guessed that an athlete of that caliber was missing most of one of his lungs.

My junior year of high school was a big year in aviation for us. I received my private pilot's license, and my dad and I began building the RV-10 in our garage at home. Tyler took an immediate interest in aviation that year – helping us assemble the many pieces of the plane whenever he could and regularly going up and poking holes in the sky with me in the Champ. It didn't take long for him to decide that he wanted to pursue a career of flying.

Knowing he wanted to fly the coolest, fastest jets out there, Tyler immediately began applying to the military academies. He ended up getting accepted to all four! A coin flip determined his fate and he went on to become a cadet at the Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs. The next four years of his life were spent earning an engineering degree, playing baseball as an Air Force Falcon, and figuring out how to overcome his biggest challenge yet.

The number of pilot positions available to graduating cadets each year is very limited compared to the number of applicants they receive. Even fewer and far between are the slots reserved for fighter pilots. As you can imagine, their standards are exceptionally high. For example, applicants who have had Lasik eye surgery are automatically disqualified, even if they have perfect vision. And then there was Tyler who was missing a significant portion of a vital organ. Even though it never stopped him from exceling at sports in the past, he knew how that looked on paper compared to the many other applicants he would be competing against.

Nothing got in the way of his determination to achieve his dream and he spent the better part of a year convincing the Air Force to let him fly. He even managed to talk a surgeon into performing an experimental procedure, removing even more of his

damaged lung. I watched Tyler struggle as he recovered from that surgery, subjecting himself to painful test after test, but not once did he ever take his eyes off the prize. To make a really long story short, he ended up getting a waiver on his physical, allowing him to attend pilot training after graduation.

With the hardest obstacle out of the way, the rest was a piece of cake in comparison. There was only one fighter pilot slot available to his class that year and Tyler got it. He then went on to graduate from fighter training at the top of his class. Now Tyler is an F-16 flight lead for the 421<sup>st</sup> Fighter Squadron based out of Hill Air Force Base near Salt Lake City, Utah. When he gets back from Afghanistan, he will begin the next step in his journey as he transitions to F-35s where he will help stand up the first ever combat squadron with that aircraft.

Tyler's path to becoming a fighter pilot is the ultimate story of determination. Whenever I find myself in a situation where there is an obstacle so huge standing in the way of my dreams that it makes me want to give up on them, I think of my friend who became an F-16 pilot with only one lung and I put my head down and keep pushing forward. I hope Tyler's story will help you realize that by having a dream, paired with focus and determination, and a willingness to overcome anything that may stand in your way, anything is possible.



**Captain Tyler 'Iron' McBride Refueling Midflight on His Way to Korea**