

Language Pathways: Connecting Heritage Learners to Federal Careers

Episode 9: Government Jobs that Use Language Skills

[Intro music]

Mathilda Reckford: Are you a learner of Arabic, Chinese, Korean, Persian, or Russian? Do you have a connection to these languages through your family or community? This is the podcast for you!

[00:30] Hello, and welcome to Language Pathways: Connecting Heritage Learners to Federal Careers. We believe in the power of multilingualism, and in this podcast series we'll discuss how your language skills can help you get hired and work successfully in the federal government. By sharing experiences that link language study to potential federal careers, we'll teach you how to leverage your language skills to get a fulfilling job.

I'm your host, Mathilda Reckford. Have you ever wondered what jobs in the federal government could use your language skills? In this [01:00] episode we're going to talk about some unique government roles available to heritage language learners.

Our guests today are Sarah Chen, Major Laura Dutton, Command Sergeant Major Jaqueline Lavelanet, Colonel Teresa Wenner, and Lieutenant Colonel Casey Degroof.

Sarah Chen is a Language Analyst at the Department of Justice and also serves as a Dedicated Technical Language Analyst in her office. She's a 2017 alumnus of the English for Heritage Language Speakers Program (EHLS), a scholarship program at Georgetown [01:30] University that provides training leading to professional-level proficiency in English and federal workplace skills.

Colonel Teresa Wenner is currently serving as the J2 and G2 Director of Intelligence at the Utah National Guard and Army National Guard Military Intelligence Strength Management Working Group Chairperson.

Lieutenant Colonel Casey DeGroof is the Commander of the 341st Military Intelligence Battalion in the Washington Army National Guard. The 341st is one of five linguist battalions in the U.S. [02:00] Army, specifically located in the National Guard. She studied Modern Standard Arabic at the Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center in 1998 and has used her language skills in deployments to Morocco and Iraq.

Major Laura Dutton is a Military Intelligence Officer with over 19 years in service and 5 years working with the linguists of the 341st Military Intelligence Battalion. She is currently assigned

to the Washington Army National Guard Recruiting and Retention Battalion where she helps recruit the new members of the Guard and the new [02:30] intelligence linguist soldiers.

Command Sergeant Major Jaqueline Lavelanet is currently serving in the Washington Army National Guard 341st Military Intelligence Battalion. She is the Senior Enlisted Leader for the Federal Operations Section of the Washington Counterdrug Program. She is also an Army-trained Arabic and Persian Farsi linguist, having served as a 35M, Human Intelligence Collector since she enlisted in 2002.

Mathilda: Thank you so much for joining us and let's get started. Can you tell us a little bit [03:00] about what you do in the federal government, starting with Sarah Chen?

Sarah Chen: I'm a language analyst. In this position, I do a lot of translation and interpretation and both document the audio translations from English to Chinese, Chinese to English, and interpretation is pretty much, you know, Mandarin or Cantonese to English. I'm a heritage speaker in Mandarin and Cantonese. I actually was raised in Cantonese at home, [03:30] and I learned Mandarin when I went to kindergarten.

Mathilda: Colonel Teresa Wenner?

Colonel Teresa Wenner: I am a military intelligence and information operations officer. Currently spanning a career of over 21 years, my first decade was spent on active duty as a full-time service member, stationed in Germany and Arizona, and serving tours in Iraq and Kosovo. My second decade plus has been in the National Guard as a part-time service member, so working one weekend a month and two weeks a year, first in Washington [04:00] state as a Washington Guardsperson and now recently as a Utah Guardsperson. So serving the military offers both full-time or part-time opportunities and each service member, after filling initial contracts or enlistments, have options to change jobs, statuses, or location.

Mathilda: Thank you. Lieutenant Colonel Casey Degroof?

Lieutenant Colonel Casey Degroof: So I am lucky and fortunate enough to be the commander of the 341st Military Intelligence Battalion, one of five linguist battalions in the U.S. Army, and stationed here [04:30] in the Washington National Guard. We have well over 100 different linguists with over 26 different languages. So really we have a great mission set in which we provide the background that our nation needs and the federal government needs to be able to gather the correct operation picture in any type of forum.

Mathilda: Major Laura Dutton?

Major Laura Dutton: So currently I work with a recruiting and retention battalion, so I work [05:00] with the recruiters who work throughout the state and with the multiple units and we

find applicants or prospective soldiers who are interested in joining the Guard. Specifically, we look for ones with language skills, not only for the Guard, but also for our local mission, our state mission, where we do emergency response and those language speakers can help with areas that have high populations of foreign language speakers in times of emergencies.

Mathilda: Command [05:30] Sergeant Major Jacqueline Lavelanet?

Command Sergeant Major Jacqueline Lavelanet: Hi, I'm currently the command sergeant major for the 341st Military Intelligence Battalion, it's a linguist battalion in the Washington Army National Guard. I am also the senior enlisted advisor within the federal operations section of the Washington counterdrug program. Prior to being in that role as the SEL at counter-drug, I worked as a language intelligence analyst in that program for about a decade.

Mathilda: Sarah, how do you use your languages skills in your work?

Sarah: NVTC, the National Virtual [06:00] Translation Center, the agency does a lot of contract work, contract translations for different federal agencies. So it has a huge contract but it also works with the agency I'm with right now, very closely in terms of human language translation.

Mathilda: How did you find your job? Did you need to prove your language skills to get your job and how did you do it?

Sarah: When I participated in EHLS 2017, English for Heritage Language [06:30] Speakers, we had weekly presentations from the different, IC- intelligence community agencies. That kind of sparked my interest and I joined the NVTC and the Department of Justice joint program, the National Virtual Translation Center, which is in collaboration with the agency I'm working with right now.

Yes, you had to get tested. There's a battery of language tests and they're [07:00] tailored for different languages. Like, you know, I at first took the Mandarin tests. So there's, you know, Chinese writing, English writing, you know, Chinese speaking and listening. So I have to go through those tests, pass those tests before I could be considered for a language analyst position. And then after I got my job, I was talking with my supervisor and said, you know, I also have these Cantonese skills so I got tested for that, speaking and listening.

Mathilda: [07:30] What advice do you have for students who might be interested in your job?

Sarah: It's a lengthy process from posting to application through sifting through applications, through testing, you know, to the conditional offer, it could be, a good six-to-12-month process too. So yeah, the whole process is very tedious and slow.

Keep applying, don't just give up because you did not get in the first time. I've known people who have applied a couple of times before they [08:00] got the position. And always start with the contractor. There are a lot of federal contractors who also do work for the government, and it's easier to get in with a federal contractor. When you go to federal jobs website, there are a lot of listings and you have to first figure out what positions you're interested in and then what agency you want to apply to. The most important part as I learned from the program I was in, was really read the job descriptions [08:30] very, very closely. And then you have to write your experience, you know, detail your experience according to what the job requirements are, you have to pretty much answer all the questions. Look at the JD, the job description, as questions. Like, you know, it requires a certain type of experience or a certain type of skillset, and you have to respond to that.

Mathilda: Turning to our military guests, what are some ways that people can [09:00] use their language skills within the military?

Command Sergeant Major Jacqueline Lavelanet: Throughout my career, I've used the language skills in a variety of different ways, from conducting interrogations, doing interviews, translating documents, building rapport, just with, foreign nationals in country, as well as conducting intelligence analysis.

Mathilda: Lieutenant Colonel Casey Degroof?

Lieutenant Colonel Casey Degroof: So we have two hats here in Washington for our battalion. We're very much PACOM or Pacific theater focused. So we have a wide variety [09:30] of Japanese, Korean, Thai, Vietnamese, Philippine Tagalog type languages. And then on the federal side, we're also prepared for the larger mission set. So myself, I'm an Arabic linguist. And, uh, we also have Russian linguists, we have Chinese linguists; we've got a large gamut to be able to prepare products as well as interpret products in foreign languages.

Very recently we had a brigade combat [10:00] team go out the door to provide a training mission in Ukraine and Poland. And before they left, they came to us and said, we need some expertise and some languages and culture. Can you help provide that? Absolutely. Another recent one is for state partners with Thailand and Malaysia. And so our high-level leaders constantly engage in those countries. And a lot of requests we get is, hey, can you have your linguists participate in some of these dialogues and exchanges? Can you also have them give our staff [10:30] cultural training and knowledge to be prepared? So as far as talking about career, you're already preparing yourself to enter in and talk to strategic-level leaders.

I think another front that gets missed is in the military, having a language brings another sense of camaraderie. So, if you think about heritage speakers and a lot of our heritage speakers come from a culture that may not be widely found in their community, but they can go to a

military unit and essentially find a [11:00] family extension that they can speak to, relate to in their own culture so it enriches that experience as well.

Mathilda: Major Laura Dutton?

Major Laura Dutton: When we started receiving PPE for the hospitals and the field hospitals for the COVID relief, a lot of it was sourced through other countries and we were able to use our linguists to determine if it was medical-grade and it could go straight to the field. And if we had had to hire a translator for that, there would have been a delay of several days because it was in [11:30] super high demand at that time. So having that critical skill at a state emergency mission had allowed us to immediately take that straight to the field to get it in use.

Mathilda: How does proficiency in another language benefit someone seeking a career in the military?

Colonel Teresa Wenner: It opens doors and also offers opportunities. Specifically financial incentives for proficiency in another language can lead up to an additional \$1,000 per month for language pay. Moreover, [12:00] an education benefit is earning a Bachelor of Arts degree in foreign language from the Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center. And both of these are in addition to other financial incentives that the military offers, which include health insurance, enlistment bonuses, and then education benefits such as the G.I. Bill and federal and state tuition assistance programs. So having proficiency in another language absolutely opens [12:30] more doors, opportunities, and you incur financial incentives and educational benefits.

Major Laura Dutton: Because we have state missions and especially in the past few years with the COVID crisis, we saw our linguists, they were assigned to their state mission to work in food banks, and they would work with multilingual families who would come in and didn't necessarily have proficiency in English. And our linguists were able to jump right in and assist them, not only with the food bank mission, [13:00] but also with general understanding. And they were able to communicate with them, which, you know, helped provide the needs, but also helped provide a sense of security and community that our linguists were able to provide. I also see with recruiting retention the importance of multilingual soldiers. Because when we work with heritage linguists and families, you don't recruit an applicant, you recruit a family to be in the military, and having a recruiter that can speak to a family in their language helps build that confidence and helps build that [13:30] relationship that makes a family more comfortable with the transition to, you know, possibly having their child join the military.

Mathilda: Lieutenant Colonel Casey Degroof?

Lieutenant Colonel Casey Degroof: So I would say the additional value set rate is, as we said, it's win-win because we also challenge them into growing their language into a profession, right? So their language was part of their life, something that they had, and now we've opened

up a door and an opportunity to say, this is how you could actually use your language to benefit [14:00] an organization. We add on the challenge of something they don't necessarily get when you're just studying language or you're speaking language at home, that's when you start saying, okay, now we want to take this and interpret this technical document, or we want to take this plan and be able to translate it so that we can communicate it in both type languages. So we take their language skill set and marry it up with a professional skill set that just makes them an overall better linguist as a professional.

Major Laura Dutton: [14:30] So one of the unique things about the National Guard is it allows people to serve their country and their community from their home. So unlike active-duty Army, where if you have the desire to serve, you're probably going to go to one of the major bases throughout the world. Here, if you serve in the Washington Army National Guard, you serve in your community. And in my experience recently with recruiting and retention, I find that's of incredible importance, especially to [15:00] our heritage speakers. Because some of our heritage speakers, they may be the primary English speaker in their family, the ones that are at the age to, you know, join the military and serve. And they want to serve but they also feel a responsibility to remain at home because they're the center of gravity in their home for a lot of reasons. So being able to serve their country, to have a career in the military and a career in government work, as they can in the National Guard, while staying home and being able to serve their country, provides an incredible opportunity.

Mathilda: [15:30] How can language learners train to become military linguists?

Lieutenant Colonel Casey Degroof: So as far as how language learners become military linguists, you know, best avenue is to start on your military career and become one of those language MOS-qualified, that gives you the opportunity to go to the Defense Language Institute in Monterey, California. And that's a about a yearlong immersion and your full-time job is to learn a language. So we take a language learner, [16:00] somebody who might just have an interest or a love for language and give them an opportunity to flourish and spend an extensive amount of time learning, understanding, and getting a deeper experience into that language.

Mathilda: Command Sergeant Major Jacqueline Lavelanet?

Command Sergeant Major Jacqueline Lavelanet: For native or heritage speakers, if they can pass the Defense Language Proficiency Test, they can bypass the DLI route and be qualified in their jobs once they complete the other training required for that position. Then there's a lot of training that [16:30] happens follow-on throughout your career. So if you know, you're going to this country and this dialect is spoken, you may need to take a class regarding that dialect. If we know we're being assigned to a specific mission—we had a soldier recently go out to New Jersey to help with intake of Afghan refugees—the area that he was focused on was helping the refugees set up bank accounts. So then that's like a very specific type of vocabulary that he probably needed to review and everything in order to be able to do that effectively. So that's kind of, what's fun about this job is that it's [17:00] always changing, and in the military,

you're moving around, you're doing different things. So, you're always getting a chance to kind of learn a different aspect of the language. It's not like you can get *too* good at learning a foreign language, so very enjoyable.

Mathilda: Great. What advice would you have for students who might be interested in a job in the military or in defense?

Colonel Teresa Wenner: I would recommend to take the time and research which job and organization or organizations you want to be a part of. There are so many career [17:30] options and pathways offered. If you're looking at a career in defense, the military, whether you're part-time as a reservist or a guardsman or full-time as active duty, it's a great gateway to gain experience, understanding, education, credentials, clearances, and access. So by serving the military, whether you do a small tour of just a couple of years, your initial enlistment or contract, or longer, if you decide to go 10 to 20. It greatly assists in building your resume and [18:00] networking that it takes to gain entry and compete for jobs in the government and defense at agencies or organizations.

Major Laura Dutton: And if you're interested in serving the government, I'd advise you to talk to a National Guard recruiter. Because the National Guard has a lot of opportunities. They also offer you the freedom of choice, the freedom of service. So if you say, I really want to be a linguist and I want to learn this language, the National Guard can help you work towards that as long as you qualify and they have that. Once you learn your language with the National Guard and you [18:30] serve, you're doing it at a part-time status, so you can then explore those opportunities with other federal agencies. Or you can go back to college and continue to build on your education. Or you can start working in the civilian sector with languages, a specific purpose, going into like the medical career with a background in language where you already have that proficiency and you've taken it from the Guard. So a career in the National Guard gives you the training, gives you the certification, gives you the opportunities, but also gives you the freedom to choose, to continue your education or to [19:00] choose to continue your service.

Lieutenant Colonel Casey Degroof: There is definitely a lot of value for doing some research and finding a mentor who has some experience. And so I—absolutely, if you find somebody with that experience and you have the opportunity, take it. Make sure that you are reaching out to somebody that you trust, who mentors you and can give you some of the options. So you don't necessarily have to take the very first thing you hear of, you know, do your due diligence, realize that this is a step in a potential career.

Command Sergeant Major Jacqueline Lavelanet: I wanted to say that [19:30] also having service members who do—having those heritage speakers, maybe they don't, they're not interested in military intelligence. They're interested in medical. And so they joined to be a medic or as a doctor or a nurse you know, we do operations with outreach to the population, vaccinations, all these different things. So having people that have that skill, regardless of

military intelligence or whatever branch of the Army or other service is so crucial to making those connections. The [20:00] ability to communicate in a foreign language can't be underestimated as an essential skill for us as service members in all of the services.

[Closing/Recap]: Well, that's all for today's episode of the Language Pathways Podcast! Thanks for joining us, and a big thank you to our guests Sarah Chen, Colonel Teresa Wenner, Lieutenant Colonel Casey Degroof, Major Laura Dutton, and Command Sergeant Major Jaqueline Lavelanet, for sharing their thoughts on these unique federal jobs. Let's sum [20:30] things up.

Speaking languages has various advantages in the careers the guests mentioned: monthly salary bonuses, travel and language training opportunities, and growing your language into a profession.

To find a job in the federal government, the guests recommend finding a trusted mentor, talking to a recruiter, reading the job description very closely, and making sure your application corresponds to everything in the job posting. They mentioned military experience can build your resume and that you should not necessarily take the first thing you find but [21:00] explore and research different opportunities. Finally, heritage learners bring valuable skills to these careers, including the ability to build trust and to help serve the needs of local communities.

In the next episode, we'll continue to build connections between language learning and federal careers by talking about recruiting and hiring processes for federal government jobs.

To continue on your journey through federal career pathways for heritage language learners, check out the other episodes in this series. You can also find the [21:30] resources we discussed and additional links in the episode description and on our website. Thank you for joining us and see you next time!

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[Outro music]