The Security Buffs

By Henry Holben

Milligan’s 235-caer open campus “proudly stands” in a region with a history of poverty and drug abuse.

“This area is bad for drugs,” says Gerald Ward, a security guard who started working at Milligan in 1991. Gerald and his fellow guards have story after story to tell: tales about running off trespassers, surprise encounters with local wildlife, strange activities performed by students, and dealings with the occasional band of pranksters. “I could write a book about my experiences here.” says Ward. So how does Milligan’s staff of four unarmed security officers keep Milligan’s faculty, students, and campus safe?

Country music is quietly playing over the car’s radio as Richard Whitaker patrols Calvin Phillips Drive.

“I wasn’t fortunate enough to go to college.” he tells me. Before being employed to work at Milligan through a security contractor called Murray guard (later acquired by Allied Universal), Richard worked for Charter Communications, installing fiber optic cables, and before that he worked as a truck driver. Now, Richard servers as supervisor in Milligan’s team of security guards. In Allied Universal’s structure he holds the rank of lieutenant.

I got to know Richard Whitaker through my adventures with the school’s robotics team. Over the summer, my teammates and I frequently had to call Richard to unlock doors to let us in the facilities we needed to use. Richard always seemed happy to go out of his way to get us into the areas we needed access to. And he always had a good story to tell our advisor.

Over the months leading up to the 2021 Marine Advanced Technology Education Remote Operated Vehicle (MATE ROV) world competition, Richard frequently asked me how the project was going and was a source of encouragement- sometimes on the days when we needed *a* *lot of* encouragement. Richard Whitaker’s name is not in mentioned any of that project’s technical documentation. Yet without his support, we may very well have not gone to competition.

One afternoon when I happened upon Richard, he warned me that he had recently spotted a vagrant on campus who appeared to be armed. Richard told me he had run this individual off the campus premises on multiple occasions.

I was surprised that I hadn’t heard any news about an unarmed security guard banishing an armed intruder from the campus grounds- repeatedly. It occurred to me that as a security guard, Richard was keeping a treasure trove of stories about Milligan’s goings on in his brain: a treasure trove that I had been oblivious of. Evidently, I wasn’t the only one.

"They’re kind of unsung because they’re kind of in the background a little bit.” says Brent Nipper, Milligan’s director of property and risk management. “I think this community does a good job of showing appreciation.”

In the past, however, Milligan’s students have not always shown the campus security officers this appreciation.

“They used to throw walnuts at me,” says Ward. “I could write a book on my experiences here. But what happens at Milligan stays at Milligan.”

My curiosity about the experiences of a Milligan security officer grew. I asked Richard if he would be willing to let me interview him and shadow him as he made his rounds around the campus. Richard graciously accepted and on Monday, October 27th, I met Richard at the physical plant for the Milligan security guard equivalent of a police ride-along.

“You thought all I did was drive around!” says Richard with a wry smile as I watch him do his daily paperwork. Richard begins his workday around 4:30 PM by clocking in at his workstation and checking his email. He checks a schedule of planned campus activities, so he will know to expect as he makes his rounds. He has just retrieved the checkpoint data off the wand he carries with him when he works his shift. Before he clocks out in the early morning, Richard will use that wand to scan 72 different checkpoints that he and other guards have placed across the campus, and some of them more than once.

As I look over his shoulder at his workstation, I notice that a certificate identifying Richard as the 2019 recipient of the “Allied Universal Hero Award” hangs on the bulletin board over his desk. I ask him about that.

In April 2019, Richard was called to the Emmanuel Village, because the driver of a tractor trailer dragging a car hauler behind it had unwittingly turned onto a dead-end road and parked in front of one of the village apartments, trapping the student cars parked there.

The driver was unable to back the truck out of the dead-end and had resigned to call for a towing service.

But Richard, who himself once worked as a semi-truck driver, took the wheel of the tractor trailer and expertly backed it out of the dead-end, freeing up the road for the seminary students and saving the truck’s driver from an expensive towing charge.

“He just looked at me real funny,” said Richard. “He was gonna call triple A to come and pull it out. Imagine what that would’ve cost?” According to Richard, he was given the Allied Universal Hero Award on account of that incident.

With his deskwork done, it's time to begin his rounds. Richard leads me out to one of Milligan’s security patrol cars, he clears the passenger seat for me and I get in to begin the ride along.

We drive away from the physical plant and stop almost immediately outside the music annex. Richard walks up to the little building, checks the doors, and swipes his wand near a little black disk attached to the building’s wall.

The wand beeps once the marker is scanned, and it's on to the next checkpoint. Richard makes his way around campus scanning his checkpoints with his wand and chatting friendlily with anyone he encounters.

As I follow him to his checkpoint by the basement door of Seeger Chapel, Richard remarks that he once found some skunks that had ventured into the basement after that door had been left open. Richard reported the animals to the maintenance staff, who removed the skunks the following morning.

“I couldn’t catch 'em,” says Richard, regarding the skunks.

Now Richard drives to the Emmanuel side of the Milligan Highway to check on a building I am much more familiar with. Richard heads into the B.D. Phillips building’s library, where he chats with the worker at the reference desk and with a student studying at a table. He locks the door on the way out so that the two remaining in the library will be able to leave whenever they like.

Typically, professors lock this building’s offices and classrooms before they leave for the day, but nonetheless, Richard finds an unlocked classroom. He goes in with his flashlight, checking for anyone who might be hiding inside. He looks out the classroom’s window and then locks its door.

Richard leaves the Phillips Building and gets back in his car. He heads for the Emmanuel village, where he will drive around slowly, watching out for anything out of the ordinary. On the way, he notices a car sitting in a gravel parking lot. To make sure it's not a trespasser, Richard pulls up behind the car to check for a Milligan sticker. The car is acceptably stickered, and now Richard recognizes the vehicle. He tells me which student it belongs to.

We get out at the Thompson center and Richard leads me inside: up the stairs and down the halls. Richard explains why some buildings contain multiple check points. The system is set up so that the security guard must walk to multiple points in the building. This is meant to discourage guards from only visiting the locations of the actual checkpoints, and not actually checking the halls.

Richard has placed many of these checkpoints himself as has Gerald Ward and other security guards who have worked at Milligan to ensure that security guards including themselves will have to walk through a building, often between multiple floors to scan every checkpoint.

The wands the security guards carry keep a log of timestamps for each marker scanned. If a guard fails to scan all the checkpoints, or spends an unreasonably long time between checkpoints, the irregularities will become apparent after the data from the guard’s wand is retrieved.

With the Thompson Center checked; Richard walks over to the Ahlgrim carriage house. It's after dark now. He remarks that he has caught people hiding here before. He scans the area with his flashlight and determines that there is no one here but the two of us.

We return to the main campus. Richard leads me down the gravel path alongside the ball fields. We step over the muddy turf and I startle slightly when Richard’s flashlight reveals the silhouette of a tall figure a few paces ahead of us- brandishing a bat.

We both get a good chuckle. It’s just a cutout of a baseball player: a pitcher hitting aid. Richard admits that he too is sometimes startled when he finds the figure, which is frequently moved around.

I am now seeing parts of the campus I have never had any reason to visit: offices and locker rooms in the David Quillen Athletic Building. Richard comments on the smell. It does reek in here. It’s been a while since I’ve smelled this. It’s the same smell my compatriots on my high-school's soccer team and I produced after hours of grueling practices. I actually feel nostalgia for this odor. That’s not something one discovers on a typical tour of the campus.

Like the B.D. Phillips building, professors with offices in the faculty office building typically lock their own doors. Regardless, Richard needs to check. As we go down the hall, Richard points out one professor’s office which he tells me is regularly left unlocked. Sure enough, the door opens with ease. Richard explains that he knows the professor and the professor knows that Richard will take care to lock his door for him- which he does.

Richard knows his routine well, after we walk down the hall towards the Clark Teacher Education center, Richard reaches from wall to wall with either hand, quickly checking each door handle as he passes them. Richard locks the doors and is already done for the night with the F.O.B and the Clark Education center.

Richard shows me the checkpoint on the tennis pavilion. He explains that he’s caught people trying to hide around the columns of the terrace, which is why Richard decided to set this check point on the corner furthest from the stairs. Apparently, Milligan’s security guards have had to deal with trespassers from time to time.

“We’ve run quite a few of ‘em off though, they start getting mad at us. Say hey look, y’know you are trespassing and y’got alcohol, y’know instead of being nice I can call the law on you and they’ll remove them to jail... I can have the [Elizabethton] police department here in less than two minutes,” Richard told me.

Richard checks the science building. He would lock it at this time, but he knows there are students working and studying here. He goes in to check on the students studying inside and informs me that he will come back later. He moves on to the Gregory Center.

Over the course of the ride along, Richard has challenged me to try to guess the number of miles he walks every night he is on duty.

“I got friends I went to high school with, can’t get around as well as me now, its sad... I do a lot of walking, don’t I?”

“I’m still trying to guess, eight miles?” I ask.

“Wait a little bit and then tell me.” says Richard.

Richard knows the number of steps from the bottom to the top of the Gregory center: thirty-eight. As he walks through the Gregory center, Richard explains the route he takes. Richard has organized his route through each building in an effort to minimize the distance he has to “backtrack”. He’s systemized his nightly tour of the campus in a manner that reminds me of the travelling salesman problem, a mathematical puzzle in which one solves for the shortest route that can be taken through a cluster of points without revisiting any one.

After we return to the Gregory Center’s lobby, Richard pauses for a moment to appreciate some artwork. With his flashlight fixed on three of the paintings on display in the lobby. Richard tells me that he knows the artist. The artist told Richard about a common feature hidden in all three of these paintings. Richard gives me time to see if I can find it.

I ask Richard if he is interested in art. Richard likes to draw cartoons and landscapes. He has a fascination with native American tribes, and features them in his artwork.

In the auditorium, he shows me where he stood guard during a showing of “You're a Good Man Charlie Brown”, checking that attendees were masked and not disruptive. When I see the way he stands in the darkened theater, I have to admit that during a crowded showing, I might have walked past him without noticing. Richard locks the doors of the building and makes sure no one is in the bathrooms before he locks down the Gregory Center for the night.

As he drives around campus, Richard has noticed some lights near Seeger chapel which have not come on. Richard checks for a number posted on a faulty light post and documents it. His report will make its way to the maintenance staff, who will take care of the problem.

Richard shows me a photo saved on his Milligan-issued work phone: three bears perched in a tree after dark, and of course, he has a story to go with it.

One evening Richard found a group of students gathered in front of Sutton Hall. They had spotted a family of black bears that had climbed into a tree. According to Richard, some of these students seemed to want to pet the baby bears.

Richard knew that while black bears are not especially aggressive toward humans, a mother bear will tear any person who interacts with her cubs to ribbons. Richard called the local wildlife department, only to be told that no one was immediately available to come take care of the bears.

Word had gotten out about the bears and now more students were gathering in front of Sutton. The mother bear stayed in the tree, keeping guard of her cubs. Likewise, Richard stood guard between the bears and the students, preventing the line of students from coming any closer to the tree. Richard points out the tree to me as we pass by on the drive up to Sutton.

Once again, we are in and out of Richard’s car quickly. Richard locks Sutton Hall’s lobby and now we are back in Richard’s car headed to Hardin Hall. The rapid pattern of driving and walking reminds me a little of a bus tour. Having gone up and down several flights of stairs, my feet are starting to get sore. Which is why I am slightly relieved when Richard makes use of Hardin’s elevator. I am impressed that Richard, who is 53 years old, takes the same walk night in, night out, swiftly checking, locking, and scanning everywhere he goes. He believes that the amount of walking he does on the job keeps him in good health.

Richard parks his car outside the Little Hartland Welcome Center and marches around it, scanning the area with his flashlight as he goes. Richard explains to me that he’s timed out his route to put him at Welshimer Library just in time to close it.

It's now almost 10 PM. Richard enters the library through the basement door. He flicks off all the switches (including some in the building’s circuit breaker panels) that he has marked with orange dots. He explains that he has marked them so that even novice guards will know which switches to turn off and which to leave on. After checking the study rooms and the open study areas, the basement door makes a loud buzzing sound as he goes out the way he came in.

Now just after 10 PM, Richard leaves the library parking lot and drives to the nearby Kenjo gas station. He pays for the gas using a card Milligan issued him. Like everything else he does. The transaction must be thoroughly documented in his reports.

The gas station is quiet and mostly empty at this time of the night. Richard goes inside to buy a soft drink and chats amicably with the store clerk, with whom he’s on a first-name basis.

Richard’s wife pulls in to the gas station. Laura Whitaker is herself one of Milligan’s security guards. Richard trained her himself. She’s just come from their home and is getting ready to go on her shift.

As for Richard, he is officially on break. He drives back to the physical plant, and introduces me to Chris Johnson, one of the newer guards to join Richard’s team. I recall what Richard told me when I arrived at the physical plant.

“You thought all I did was drive around!” According to Chris, this is the biggest misconception commonly held about the job.

Richard’s shift will go on until 3 AM, but following him on his mission to scan seventy-two checkpoints, to check all the usual hiding places, and lock every door left unsecured has worn me out.

The following evening, I wait in Welshimer Library until Richard comes to shut it down.

Tonight, at the physical plant, Richard introduces me to Gerald Ward then sits to eat his dinner while I listen to Gerald.

Gerald was the security guard who trained Richard, when Richard first started working at Milligan.

“When he was hired in, sometimes it takes a week and they still don’t learn anything. He learned it overnight.” Says Gerald about Richard. Unlike Richard, who worked installing fiber optic cables before coming to Milligan, Gerald has a background in law enforcement.

In 1991, Gerald got a job working as a corrections officer at the Northeast Correctional Complex in Mountain City. He lived with the inmates he guarded.

“I didn’t have any problems with them.” He tells me. He earned the respect of the inmates “By respecting them as human beings.” As a corrections officer, Gerald was trained in how to use force if necessary to subdue a violent prisoner. But Milligan’s security guards do not carry weapons. “Talking to an individual is a use of force.”, explains Gerald.

Gerald got a job with Murray Guard in 2008. He stayed until June of 2020 and returned this semester. This is his fourth week back at Milligan.

“I’m the old man on the block,” he says.

Gerald and Richard head to their cars. Again, Richard notices and documents some dead light fixtures on his way around campus.

Two students are still exercising in the building when Richard walks in to close up the Steve Lacy fieldhouse. Richard checks the rooms surrounding the gymnasium, giving the students time to finish up their activities before Richard locks the door.

Richard takes out his flashlight and begins checking the darkened corners and crannies. He is careful to peer up the slanted walls with his flashlight to make sure everyone has left the building for the night. He points out all the places he has caught people hiding inside the fieldhouse as we go along.

It's becoming apparent that I am less familiar with Milligan’s campus than I had previously thought. More than once, I lose sight of Richard as he walks through the labyrinth-esque jumble of darkened locker rooms, offices, and athletic facilities: disappearing here, showing up a minute later somewhere else. I find him again by following his voice and learn to follow close behind.

I’ve especially been looking forward to seeing Richard patrol Seegar chapel. He goes in through the basement door. What follows, for me, is a meticulously detailed tour of a building I thought I already knew well enough.

Richard showed me things I would not have guessed to be stowed away in the back of the chapel: for example, a door that leads to a straight drop down to the floor below.

I’m not expecting to have my mind blown by anything in this chapel. But when Richard opens the door to a chamber behind the back stage wall I am awestruck. I am now standing beneath, and surrounded by some of the inner workings of the chapel’s pipe organ.

Like an expert tour guide, Richard points out the details of the instrument. He shows me a different room which brings the electronics enthusiast out of me: the stacks of electrical circuit boards that help to control the pipe organ.

Just as with Welshimer Library, Richard knows which lights must stay on and which must be turned off. He explains that some LED lights positioned in colder hallways must be left on by the guards, as the rapid change of temperature when the light is flicked on risks damaging the bulbs.

Just as it was with the fieldhouse, Richard points out the hiding spots where he has found students- including the baptistry. Richard walks across one of the balconies to make sure no one is hiding between the rows of seats on the floor below us.

Richard takes a minute to point out the craftsmanship in one of the chapels-stained glass windows. I’ve not bothered to look this closely at the window before. Richard tells me to touch and feel the metalwork in the window- to get a closer perspective of the artwork.

Back outside and patrolling once again, Richard notes another lightless light pole and parks the car. He tells me to go read the pole number. Having spent about nine hours as dead weight on Richard’s guard shift, I am finally being put to some useful purpose.

The light pole number is noted and we are back in the car. It's now almost 3 A.M. The ride-along is over. Richard drives me down to the desolate parking lot where my car is and then heads back towards the physical plant to finally call it a night.

The close-knit community, and the fellowship between faculty and students are often touted as features that make Milligan stand out from the typical university. But the love and care for Milligan’s students is not a quality limited to the school’s professors.

“They really do care about Milligan and want to be here.” says Brent Nipper.

Richard Whitaker has no degree from an institution of higher learning. Instead, he employs his personability, his life experience, and his professional training to serve the Milligan community.

Gerald Ward says that the pay is meager. But money is not why he does what he does. Just like Milligan’s professors, the campus security guards are passionate about their work. They have a fierce love for the community they serve to protect.

“I could go get paid more at McDonalds than I could here. But I’ve made a career out of this... I love it here.” says Ward, “I’m a security buff.”