

# The Rise 8 Origin Story

What happens when an Air Force Captain decides to take on the world's largest bureaucracy? Eventually, Rise8. But how we got here is a story in its own right.

Pivot back to 2017. While future Rise8 founder and US Air Force Intelligence Officer Bryon Kroger didn't plan on going head-to-head with one of the biggest arms of the US government, he also knew that there had to be a faster way of developing software inside the Air Force that looked less like death-by-Powerpoint and more like Silicon Valley.

As Bryon commonly encountered during his tenure with the Air Force, the organization had something of a love affair with stopgap solutions—most commonly bolt-ons to applications like Excel and Word which were approved for internal use and thus widely employed, sometimes beyond their logical uses. The result: everything from targeting databases to mission-critical missions were being plotted using tools that wouldn't have looked amiss in the MS-DOS era.

## **Poor technology often leads to poor results. Case in point: the Kunduz Hospital airstrike.**

A US Air Force gunship struck a Doctors Without Borders trauma center resulting in 42 deaths and 30 injuries. Many things went wrong that day, but Bryon was appalled by the software issues that didn't seem to get any attention at all. When it comes to technology stacks in the military, the price of having the wrong tools for the job can be nothing short of catastrophic.

Bryon became convinced he had transformed the way the DoD builds and delivers software. He put in paperwork to become an acquisitions officer and got himself assigned to the Air Force Lifecycle Management Center (AFLCMC) Targeting & GEOINT Program Management Office at Hanscom AFB, MA. He was going to fix the problem himself, from the inside. On day one, Bryon called a friend at DIUx and began the acquisitions process that would transform the Air Force software landscape.

# Eric Schmidt has entered the chat

While Bryon was getting started on his plans to transform software in the Air Force, Google CEO Eric Schmidt, serving as Chairman of the Defense Innovation Board, was confronted by the sight of the planning whiteboard at the Air Operations Center. He encouraged the Air Force to change. And in quick fashion.

The first hurdle in this challenge? The defense community was relying upon technology that lagged far behind what was available in the civilian sector — despite the cost of failure being exponentially higher. As Lt. Gen. Michael Groen of the Joint Artificial Intelligence Centre observes, “I can walk out into the parking lot of the Pentagon, turn on my iPhone and join a data-driven, completely integrated environment. I can get whatever services I want. I can review, I can find, I can research. I can do it all at my fingertips. I can’t do any of that on a defense network.”

## Bringing Tech Best Practices Into The Air Force

Although the Air Force employed an “if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it” approach, the desire to change was honest and the DIUx/AFLCMC modernization effort was already underway. Eric Schmidt’s encouragement to modernize technology quickly set in motion a series of events that heralded the beginning of a new age of agile within this key organ of the US defense community.

One didn’t have to look far to find an example of who to emulate when it came to producing tech that works at speed. Startups around Silicon Valley — and indeed the world — were already veteran exponents of agile development practices.

What if the Air Force swapped their uniforms for the t-shirt and jeans uniform of the tech sector? What if they worked out of WeWork offices instead of cubicle farms? At the time, the Air Force only counted 200 developers scattered among its ranks, most not being used to developing entire pieces of software.

And this series of “what ifs” is exactly what Bryon made happen when he co-founded Kessel Run — his precursor to Rise8. Kessel Run was an official project of the US Air Force and was responsible for spearheading digital transformation, adoption of technology, and finding faster solutions to problems from inside the Air Force.

While Kessel Run represented the first systematic attempt to develop a technological driver within the Air Force, Bryon still believed that more had to be done. Bryon came to believe that in order to create the technological change needed to best support the objectives of the Air Force, change needed to be driven externally.

Development methodologies such as DevSecOps were already being widely deployed in the civilian sector. These practices allowed change agents to bring highly secure and innovative solutions to the market in record time. Bryon believed that those same practices could find a suitable home within the defense community. What institutions like the Air Force needed was a nudge in the right direction — perhaps from the civilian sector — to push them towards ways of developing technology that yielded better results in less time.

How could Bryon herald a new era where institutions like the Air Force were transformed by civilian talent who had DoD expertise? He had to become a civilian himself. The day he separated from the Air Force, Bryon opened the doors of Rise8, a software development consultancy with a difference.

Combining the culture and practice of Silicon Valley with deep-running expertise in working with the DoD, Rise8 leverages this unique synergy to continue the mission of changing how the government operates, enabling soldiers and airmen to obtain the technology needed to secure the homeland and defeat adversaries.

Rise8 champions an “I lead, we lead, you lead” philosophy, fusing a unique culture to drive modern methodologies like DevSecOps where they’ve never gone before. When Rise8 leaves the scene, clients are left with a fully functional team ready to leverage Silicon Valley know-how to transform bureaucracy and drive innovation internally. The end result is a better world where fewer bad things happen because of bad software.