

[Jaime Cone, Brattleboro Reformer](#)

Derek Sargent, of Guilford, was fascinated with aviation at a very, very young age.

"I've wanted to be a pilot ever since I saw an airplane for the first time," he said.

The childhood memory of being 7-years-old and going up in a plane at an air show has stuck with him all these years. It was the first time he was ever allowed to "fly" a plane.

"The pilot let me fly for five seconds when we were up there, which was really cool," Sargent said.

According to his mother, Tammy Sargent, he was already "obsessed" with planes by the time he got that first flying experience.

"It was a four-seater plane, and I sat in the back with his brother while he got to sit in the front," she said. "The pilot let him take the controls and fly the plane for little bit, and he had just been handed the world, at that point."

Now the dream that began all those years ago is on its way to becoming reality, as Congressman Peter Welch and United States Senator Patrick Leahy recently announced they are nominating Sargent for the United States Air Force Academy class of 2015.

"I received Leahy's letter first, and I thought it was just another one of the letters I had been getting keeping me up to date (with the academy's application process)," Sargent said.

"Then I opened it up and I was so excited. That was a huge check-mark on my list of things to get done," he said.

And Sargent does have a ways to go before he's accepted into the academy, but every applicant must be nominated by a senator or member of congress to even be considered for the prestigious school, located in Colorado.

Twenty-nine Vermont residents received United States Service Academy nominations this year, including Stefan J. Schmidt of South Londonderry and Matthew M. Sims of Stratton.

The list of Vermonters includes nominees for admission to not just the Air Force Academy but the Military, Naval and Merchant Marine Academies as well.

"You will still need to meet the rigorous academic, physical and mental requirements set by the Academy before receiving an appointment offer," wrote Leahy in his letter to Sargent.

"I would be pleased to have you represent Vermont," he said.

The letter from Welch acknowledges Sargent as having "worked hard throughout your high school career to reach your goals."

"You stand out as a leader," he wrote.

Welch also said he was particularly impressed by Sargent's numerous scholastic awards and leadership positions in the Boy Scouts of America Troop 403.

Sargent, a senior at Brattleboro Union High School, has also received the school's highest scholastic honor, the Lamp of Knowledge, all three years of high school.

He joined Cub Scouts when he was 7-years-old, his mother said, and next week he will go before a board of review to become an Eagle Scout.

It's fairly uncommon for a Boy Scout to stick with the program for all the years it takes to become an Eagle Scout, said Bevan Quinn, Scoutmaster of Troop 403.

"You have to spend a lot of years doing something while still being a kid," Quinn said.

"I thought he would get nominated," he added. "He's a good candidate with the right stuff."

Tammy Sargent said her son's determination has served him well.

"If he starts something or puts his mind to it, he completes it," she said.

She said she never had any doubt that one way or the other he would end up becoming a pilot.

"He's worked so hard and stayed so focused," she said. "I'm not surprised, but very proud."

Sargent said he decided to apply to the Air Force Academy for several reasons.

"When you graduate the Academy, you will have had six years of education in four years, so obviously the education portion is outstanding," he said. "You come out an officer in the Air Force, and that in itself opens up a lot of opportunities to jump-start my career, because I want to be a pilot. The best fighter pilot."

Sargent said he definitely wants to be a fighter pilot and has little interest in flying a commercial plane.

"With commercial pilots, it's less flying then reading instruments," he said. "I want to be more involved in actual flying; I want to pull G's, not just sit there and read instruments."

He said he would welcome the opportunity to be stationed in a foreign country.

"I like traveling, so I think if I was stationed at a base somewhere, that would be a unique experience and I'd enjoy it," he said.

He has two uncles in the National Guard, who recently returned from Iraq, and he has a great respect for those who serve their country overseas.

"We need to remember that the people out there are doing their job, and to always support them because they are putting their lives on the line," he said.

If he doesn't get accepted to the Academy, he hopes to attend a college that offers a Reserve Officers Training Corp program, which is not available at BUHS.

He even has plans for after he retires.

"I'd like to retire from the Air Force and start a pilot company in Alaska -- a bush pilot kind of thing," he said.

In honor of his nomination, Sargent and his parents were invited to attend a United States Service Academy Ceremony hosted by Leahy along with representatives of the Vermont congressional delegation.

The ceremony will take place on Sunday from 1:30 to 2:30 p.m. at the Vermont State House in Montpelier.

"At a young age, the Vermonters I nominated to our nation's service academies have already shown a remarkable commitment to their state and country," said Welch. "Their hard work, dedication and leadership potential speaks volumes about them. I commend their desire to serve their country, and I wish them the best of luck."