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DSS special agent receives American Foreign Service Association 2020 Sinclaire Language Award

DSS ARTICLES

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Diplomatic Security Service (DSS) Special Agent Melvin "JR" Pace holds the 2020 Matilda Sinclair Language award recognizing his outstanding proficiency in Khmer, Phnom Penh, Cambodia, December 3, 2020. (U.S. Department of State photo)

The American Foreign Service Association (AFSA) announced Diplomatic Security Service (DSS) Special Agent Melvin "JR" Pace, as one of the **2020 Matilda Sinclair Language Award** winners for his proficiency in Cambodian/Khmer. The award honors members of the Foreign Service who have achieved an outstanding level of proficiency in a language that is difficult for native English speakers.

"I am very humbled by my selection, but I do not consider myself a linguist," said Pace.

Special Agent Pace describes himself as a kid from rural Virginia who has been blessed with enriching professional experiences. He currently serves as the Assistant Regional Security Officer Investigator (ARSO-I) at the U.S. Embassy in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. As an ARSO-I, Pace provides on-the-ground investigative assistance to stop passport and visa fraud, and other crimes that affect U.S. citizens such as human trafficking and money laundering. ARSO-Is also train host nation law enforcement and immigration officials, airline personnel, and others to detect fraudulent travel documents and methods used by criminal and terrorist groups.

Like many ARSO-Is, Pace has a dynamic professional background. He served in the U.S. Air Force (USAF) as an air traffic controller and later as an aerospace physiology technician, teaching altitude physiology to USAF aircrews and special forces. He also worked as a federal air marshal with the Department of Homeland Security, flying mostly international missions, and he joined DSS in 2013.

“My start at DSS was a little rocky due to some family health challenges, but the DS Peer Support Group and my Basic Special Agent Course (BSAC) coordinators really took care of me and my family during that time, and that solidified DSS as home for me,” recalls Pace.

Once Pace completed BSAC, he hit the ground running. He was assigned to the Washington Field Office and was asked to fill in as an “acting” unit supervisor during the last six months of his assignment. Pace says that he was able to rise to the challenge thanks to the support and trust of his supervisors, and that has remained true throughout his DSS career.

Pace’s first assignment as an ARSO in 2017 took him to Bogota, Colombia, where he applied his FSI language training. Colombia was an important country to have proficient Spanish skills, because few people spoke English outside of the embassy and the hotel industry. Pace recalls using his Spanish frequently to manage the full gamut of programs at RSO Bogota. In September 2019, Pace started Khmer language instruction for his current ARSO-I assignment in Cambodia. He praises his two instructors who shared their passion for teaching students language and culture.

Pace is just starting to get settled in Cambodia, and he has put his Khmer to good use at a few formal events. He practices every morning with his tuk tuk (a motorized three-wheeled taxi) driver on the way to work, and he puts his skills to use while coordinating host nation law enforcement meetings outside of Phnom Penh.

Not bad for a humble kid from rural Virginia.

Read the [DSS press release](#) for more information on the AFSA award announcement.