

Reservist pitches for San Diego Padres

ROBINS AIR FORCE BASE, Ga. — When he isn't wearing the blue and gray uniform of the San Diego Padres, relief pitcher **Jason Szuminski** switches to Air Force blue as a first lieutenant in the Air Force Reserve.

The 6-foot-4-inch, 220-pound right-hander is the only Air Force reservist in Major League Baseball. He's assigned to the Air Force Research Laboratory at Edwards Air Force Base, Calif.

The lieutenant attended the Massachusetts Institute of Technology on an Air Force ROTC scholarship. While there, he tried out for the school's varsity baseball team as a walk-on. After a successful college career, he was drafted in 2000 by the Chicago Cubs in the 27th round of the amateur baseball draft.

He made his professional debut with Chicago's rookie league team [See "Baseball's a Hit with this Airman," June 2002] in Arizona and then returned to Cambridge to earn his degree in aerospace engineering. After graduation, the Cubs wanted him to report to their Class A team in Michigan. However, he still owed the active duty Air Force four years because of his ROTC scholarship.

It looked like his dream of a major league career was over until the lieutenant discovered the Air Force's World Class Athlete Program, which allows elite athletes to train with the goal of making an Olympic team. The program gave him the chance to develop his baseball skills in the Cubs' minor league system and shoot for making the 2004 Olympic baseball team.

That plan went awry when the team lost in an Olympic qualifying tournament, effectively knocking Lieutenant Szuminski out of the program.

In December 2003, the Kansas City

Royals obtained the officer from the Cubs in the Rule 5 draft and then traded him to the Padres. As a condition of his draft, the Padres were obligated to invite him to spring training in February and give him an opportunity to make the major league team.

There was only one problem: He still had a year remaining on his active duty commitment. In a final attempt to keep his dream alive, the lieutenant offered to

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trade in his one-year commitment for a three-year commitment in the Reserve. He submitted his paperwork and was allowed to attend spring training pending a ruling on his request.

The transfer to the Reserve was approved, and Lieutenant Szuminski lived up to his end of the bargain by making the Padres team as a member of the bullpen.

— Air Force Reserve Command News Service



First Lt. Jason Szuminski, relief pitcher for the San Diego Padres, warms up in the bullpen during a game against the Atlanta Braves. He made his major league debut in April during a nationally televised game against the San Francisco Giants and superstar Barry Bonds. He gave up one unearned run in one inning of work and got Barry Bonds out on a fly ball to left field.