



Aiming High Academically

Is there a doctor in the dorm?

by Master Sgt. Chuck Roberts

by Master Sgt. Keith Reed



Dr. Al Colangelo stands above the "711 Simulation Center," an area to simulate and test war scenarios for NATO allied forces. Based at Einsiedlerhof Air Station, Germany, the retired master sergeant works in the Warrior Preparation Center as the information technology instructor controller. While on active duty, he was assigned to various areas of Germany, working in civil engineering and in professional military education, while he pursued his master's degree and eventually his doctorate.

When Al Colangelo boarded the bus for basic training in 1977, his dad told him, "Get all the education you can while you're in."

Twenty years later, he retired not only as a master sergeant with a master's degree, but also in hot pursuit of a doctorate in organizational leadership.

Had he remained on active duty another three years, he would have held the title of sergeant and doctor. Uncommon perhaps, but not unique.

Among approximately 297,000 enlisted Airmen, 17 — or less than .01 percent — currently possess Ph.D.s or professional degrees in fields such as music, law and dentistry, according to Air Force Personnel Center statistics. By comparison, among about 73,000 officers, approximately 1,000 — or 1.4 percent — claim doctorate degrees, and approximately 5,600 — or 7.7 percent — have professional degrees.

The 17 enlisted men and women with doctorate and professional degrees range from senior airman to chief master sergeant. Others, like Staff Sgt. Tanya Davis and Tech. Sgt. Angelo Thomas, are working hard to join their ranks.

But as Dr. Colangelo pointed out, the journey from airman basic to the highest ranks of academia is demanding and requires support from the home front.

But the rewards can be great both individually and for the Air Force.

"I wanted to climb that mountain and put that peg in the top," he said of his desire to pursue a doctorate as a master sergeant serving as superintendent of the Airman Leadership School at Kapaun Air Station, Germany. He currently works only a short distance away from the school at the Warrior Preparation Center at Einsiedlerhof Air Station as the information technology instructor controller.

An itch to learn

Like many young recruits, Dr. Colangelo joined the Air Force to take advantage of its academic benefits. He quickly became hooked on higher education and earned a bachelor's degree in 10 years while serving as an air conditioner and refrigeration planner/estimator for civil engineering. He soon felt the "itch to learn" again and emerged from the classroom two years later with dual masters' degrees in adult and higher education and human relations.

He faced the same decision to try for a commission as other enlisted members who possess a college diploma, but elected to finish his career wearing stripes. But that didn't mean an end to education. When a University of Oklahoma professor suggested he was

“Ph.D. material,” he applied for and was accepted into the school’s initial European doctorate program.

Almost without exception, the reaction from both enlisted and officers who he worked with were only positive. In fact, his wing commander gave him his thesis idea on how to be a follower. He put his education to work while still enlisted by helping those around him improve their writing and speaking skills, as well as influencing Airmen to continue their educations.

A dentist and an Airman

That’s what Senior Airman Herodina Lu continues to do at Spangdahlem Air Base, Germany, where she works as a dental assistant while holding a doctorate of dental medicine from the Philippines. The 27-year-old San Diego native moved there when her father retired from the Navy and spent six years completing her doctoral studies there.

Unable to take national board exams there because

of her U.S. citizenship, Airman Lu moved to New Jersey and began looking for work and laying the groundwork to take the U.S. national board exams. Unable to find employment, she responded to a newspaper recruiting ad and soon became an enlisted dental assistant.

“I have no regrets going enlisted,” Airman Lu said. Although she tends to keep her academic credentials to herself, people usually find out. However, she’s treated the same as anyone else except for being called “Dr. Lu” on occasion at her previous base. “I’m very humble about it,” she said.

She’s also pragmatic about her status. Airman Lu said she enjoys the opportunity to observe skills of various Air Force dentists and hopes to implement what she sees into her own practice one day. In the meantime, like most new Airmen, she stays busy taking career correspondence courses and studying for promotion. But, she also tries to find time to prepare for the two national dental board exams and the ensuing state exam.

Airman Lu said she’d like to receive a commission and become an Air Force dentist, but not for a career. Instead, she’d like to separate after her initial term of service and focus her talents on helping the poor and needy. “It’s a lot of hurdles, but I know I’ll get there.”

From law school to survival school

After graduating in 1998 with a law degree from Northwestern School of Law of Lewis and Clark Col-

lege in Portland, Ore., Senior Airman Travis Pierce worked on and off for three years in general practice in Oregon. He then felt the urge for a more active lifestyle and joined the Air Force to become a para-rescueman.

“I’m really interested in the aspect of helping people,” he said.

Plus there’s the age factor, the 30-year-old added. “I can do this and still be a lawyer but not vice-versa.”

However, his plans changed when he was unable to complete the water portion of the grueling PJ pipeline training encompassing more than a year. Instead, he became an instructor at the survival, evasion, resistance and escape school at Fairchild Air Force Base, Wash. So far, so good.

“I absolutely love it and plan to make it a career,” Airman Pierce said of Air Force life. “When I’m in front of students, I love every minute. You never know who is going to need it. It might be your guy who needs it,” he said of the training aimed at helping aircrews survive if their aircraft goes down in remote or hostile areas.

But he’s known not just as an instructor around Fairchild. “Around the unit I’m known as the guy with the law degree,” he said, but noted he receives “nothing but respect for it” from officers and fellow enlisted.

“I really don’t see how it could be a disadvantage,” he responded to how an enlisted Airman fits in

by Master Sgt. Jim Varhegyi



Chief Master Sgt. Mark Williams looks over an award package (above) in his office at Bolling Air Force Base, Washington, D.C.

With a doctor of musical arts degree in trombone performance and as manager for the Air Force Band, he spends most of his days dealing with personnel matters for 232 enlisted band members. But the 18-year Air Force veteran’s first love remains making music. Chief Williams plays the trombone during a December holiday performance (below, foreground) and keeps his “chops” in shape by practicing his horn about an hour each day to maintain muscle tone and proficiency. More than half of the 17 enlisted Airmen with a Ph.D. or professional degree can be found in Air Force bands in Washington, D.C., and Colorado. Others are found in career fields such as dentistry and the survival, evasion, resistance and escape school at Fairchild Air Force Base, Wash.

Dental technician Senior Airman Herodina Lu (left) performs a routine tooth cleaning on Staff Sgt. John Geissbuhler at Spangdahlem Air Base, Germany. Airman Lu takes a study break to relax with her husband, Laurence (right), and son, Tristan, while also grabbing a quick bite of lunch. She’s among less than .01 percent of enlisted Airmen who currently hold a Ph.D. or professional degree, with a doctorate of dental medicine from the Philippines. She likes enlisted life, but plans to put her degree to work as an Air Force dentist and in service to the poor and needy.

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USAF photo



today's Air Force with a professional degree. However, he said he'll consider the possibility of a commission in a similar career field such as combat rescue officer as long as it's "out doing things."

A chief and a doctor

Chief Master Sgt. Mark Williams is putting his thesis to work, literally. He earned a doctorate of musical arts in trombone performance and is a trombone player and band manager for the Air Force Band at Bolling Air Force Base, Washington, D.C.

However, an enlisted Airman with a Ph.D. doesn't stand out as much in the Air Force music world. Eleven bandsmen can claim doctorate degrees throughout the Air Force's 13 bands.

Chief Williams was pursuing a doctorate degree when he auditioned for the band in 1985. He credits the discipline of his doctorate program with helping him land a

position in the band. He competed among 60 hopefuls in the grueling audition process and said a single mistake could have washed him out. Since then, the chief said his academic background continues to pay big dividends.

His boss, Col. Dennis Layendecker, agrees from his standpoint as a band commander. "I can imagine the benefits of Ph.D.s across our Air Force enlisted corps would reap similar benefits to those we enjoy in the band career field," he said. "Namely, seasoned, competent professionals who are immediately able to perform at world-class levels in an extraordinarily sophisticated business. They walk in the door already masters of their craft with very little upfront investment by the Air Force."

Doctors on the horizon

Sergeant Thomas used tuition assistance to help pay the cost of his bachelor's and master's degrees. He's now in his final year of doctorate studies with the University of Nebraska, but must pay out-of-pocket for his third academic diploma because tuition assistance can't be used toward a doctorate's degree. However, financial assistance can come from other sources such as the G.I. Bill.

The maintenance scheduler with the 7th Maintenance Operations Squadron at Dyess Air Force Base, Texas, preaches education to younger troops and advises them to "not miss this opportunity."

"The Air Force is paying for it," he said. "Even if you don't know what you want to do, [get a degree]."

Sergeant Davis isn't in a doctorate program yet, but

seems certain to include it in her well-marked career path. After entering the Air Force four years ago with two years of college under her belt, she'll earn her bachelor's degree in sociology this summer, immediately begin work on a master's degree, and "seriously" plan to complete a Ph.D. in sociology within six years. "I'm going all the way with my education," said a determined 27-year-old aerospace ground equipment instructor at Sheppard Air Force Base, Texas.

She's realized one of the key elements Dr. Colangelo said is necessary — family support. She describes her husband, Brad, a former Marine, as a "Mr. Mom" who worries his wife is taking on too much too fast, but has held down the home front in recent years by cooking dinner and putting their three kids, Cory, Donovan and Kirstin, to bed each night.

"I've missed out on a lot of things, but I know there's going to be payback. My family has been put on hold for me," she said. After receiving her Ph.D., she intends to finish her military career as enlisted because she likes being part of the mission.

"I don't want to be in charge," she said. "I like getting dirty."

After the Air Force, she sees a possible career in teaching or field work.

Giving back

Dr. Ron Johnson, a retired senior master sergeant, perhaps best exemplifies the intrinsic value

of enlisted Airmen and higher education. He came from a poor family where no one attended college. As he rose through the enlisted ranks in the services career field, he also never attended college but accumulated enough college credit through military courses to put him within 11 semester hours of an associate's degree.

His commander, Lt. Col. Charles Carr, called him into his office one day and encouraged him to take college courses to better his chances of promotion to senior master sergeant. Dr. Johnson took his advice and discovered he "felt at home in the classroom." His extended classroom included Saudi Arabia where he took night classes while overseeing the feeding of 5,000 troops.

After completing his master's degree, he deployed to Bosnia in 1998 when he learned that a doctorate program had just become available in Europe through the University of Oklahoma. Once again, he heeded the encouragement of his commander who told him a doctorate would be great for him and the Air Force.

He began in 1999 and was awarded his doctorate in December 2003. He retired in 2001 and currently works as the director of instructional programs for Central Texas College, Europe Campus in Mannheim, Germany.

Had he received his Ph.D. before retiring, he too would have chosen to remain enlisted. "I think you're more respected for what you do," he said.

However, a senior enlisted leader once told him at a gathering of senior noncommissioned officers that he considered anyone who took more than two college classes a year to be a full-time student. Dr. Johnson disagrees, pointing out that his time in the classroom only made him a better leader and senior noncommissioned officer.

"I did it [pursued a Ph.D.] because I thought it would help me and the Air Force," he said, adding that it was mostly because of the Air Force that he continued to pursue higher education, and continues to serve the military community in his current capacity.

"I wanted to give something back. I was so blessed in the Air Force. I've dedicated my life to giving back to the Air Force," he said.

He's now at the end of his long and arduous journey to obtain a Ph.D., but he said it's within the grasp of anyone who has the desire.

"I always say it's possible — look at me." ✪

Dr. Ron Johnson (left) takes notes during a Central Texas College class in automotive computer systems at Kapaun Air Station, Germany, to enhance the quality of education being taught. As director of instructional programs, the retired senior master sergeant uses the Ph.D. he began while in the service to ensure the curriculum gives students the finest education possible as they prepare for advancement. Memorabilia (right) from airman basic to senior master sergeant and a doctorate's degree mark Dr. Johnson's educational journey. He joined the Air Force from a poor background and with little thought to pursuing a life of higher education, but he credits the Air Force with helping him capture the Ph.D.

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