



Photo by David Calvert

## Military experience adds depth to undergraduate experience

Veterans who are undergraduates are not only older and more mature than their counterparts, but many—especially combat veterans—have seen and experienced things most people will never see or experience.

And, like many other non-traditional students—those who don't enter college right out of high school—veterans are dedicated, focused and highly successful, according to Johann Sprenger, the University's Veterans Services coordinator.

"Veterans do as well as or better than the average student, mainly because they are a little more mature. They've been around and experienced life like we haven't. They are goal-oriented," he says.

John Newman, a 32-year-old environmental science senior, was goal-oriented from early adulthood. He joined the U.S. Army at age 24 "for the sole purpose of education benefits," he says. However, he notes that he wanted the American military experience. "My father was in the Air Force. His father had served and was

injured. But, it was more an American rather than a family tradition to serve in the military. I wanted to be a part of it."

Newman, who needed to fully support himself after graduating from high school, had tried to work construction jobs and attend classes before he enlisted, but "it was a struggle. My credits were building very slowly. My ability to give my full attention to my schoolwork, as my peers could, was strained. Those were long, hard days." So the Army, which offered education benefits as well as a chance to see the world, seemed like a perfect option.

Like many current veterans, Newman joined before 9/11, at which point "the whole game changed," he says. While he was stationed homeside, as well as his first six months overseas in Kosovo, he was able to earn college credits while working as a soldier. But with deployment to combat duty in Iraq, the opportunity ended.

Joining the Army, despite the unexpected turn, "was a life-changing experience and the best decision I've ever made," he says.

*Wolf Pack Veterans Clayton Bussiere, 24, Air Force; Stuart Greenfield, 25, Marine Corps; Victor Profito, 26, Air Force, Teresa Thurtle, 24, Air Guard; Gary Mireles, 26, Marine Corps/Air Guard; Matt Sabatini, 23, Marine Corps and Benjamin Becerra, 26, Navy. INSET: John Newman, Army, while setting up a large-scale traffic control point north of Fallujah in 2004.*

Newman spent four years overseas. When he returned, he worked as the Veterans Administration's global war on terror readjustment counseling outreach coordinator for northern Nevada. He resigned and returned to school because as a counselor his career was tracking toward social work, but his real love is environmental science.

While veterans in general are highly successful students, they can have unique difficulties. Returning to civilian life can be tough after months without something as simple as clean laundry, and, as in Newman's case, an entire year "without a porcelain toilet that flushed itself or a sink that ran water." When he came back, he took two showers a day for a week "just because it felt so good."

In addition, after four years, Reno itself had become unfamiliar. "It had practically doubled in size. I had missed out on four years culture and music. The cars were all different. It was

# Student Success

like returning to a whole new world”

Newman, like many combat veterans, also had to deal with “combat stress,” technically called Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. One of the symptoms of PTSD is that it can leave people easy to anger, irritable and hyper vigilant—a combination that can also leave them unwilling to “jump through hoops,” typically required in any university bureaucracy. He explains, “People who are experiencing combat-induced PTSD have either witnessed atrocities or have some perspective on how close death can be at any time.” Combat duty is “being immersed in hostility, being completely faceless and anonymous, knowing it could be you or the guy standing next to you. The bomb does not care whether you have a family that loves you, whether you have a scholarship coming to you, whether you have a car waiting for you, or whether you’ve been saving your money and you have a wife and child, or whether you are just some guy who drinks his money away—the enemy does not care.”

After experiencing these types of things—which are not normal—and then being returned “to a protected and structured society, where people get angry for having to stop for you at a crosswalk, even though all the effort that that took was raising the foot off one pedal and depressing the other for 10 or 15 seconds” veterans can find dealing with such pettiness unbearable.

“It’s a perspective. I’m more concerned about whether I’m going to live to go to sleep tonight,” Newman notes.

Veterans can also have a hard time dealing with seemingly meaningless complexities such as standing in line. “It’s a feeling that I don’t want to deal with this level of difficulty because where I just came from things were pretty simple: I’ve got my boots. I’ve got my bullets.”

Here’s where Johann Sprenger comes in. The Veterans Services coordinator is an

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*John Newman on the perspective of veterans.*



*Stuart Greenfield, far right, poses in Fallujah, Iraq with some of his Marine Corps buddies.*

“outstanding resource,” Newman says. “He’s the man. He helps with everything: billing, course substitutions, prerequisite overrides. If a veteran doesn’t know the system, they can go to him.”

Last fall, Sprenger’s office oversaw some 365 veterans and their dependents who were attending classes.

Veterans can also find support in Wolf Pack Veterans, a student group. Led this year by 25-year-old Stuart Greenfield, a junior business management major with a minor in economics, the group meets regularly and hosts fundraising events for scholarships for veterans.

Members of the Vietnam Veterans of America often attend the student group’s meetings offering guidance.

Teresa Thurtle, ’08 (criminal justice/women’s studies), 24, who is currently a member of the Air Guard, says Wolf Pack Veterans “is

still a young organization, but it has a lot of potential. It’s a good, positive place to be where veterans can come together for camaraderie, mixing civilian life with military experience.” Thurtle graduated in December.

Greenfield says he wasn’t ready for college at age 18. So the day after graduating from Galena High School in 2000, he joined

the Marines. Like Newman, he followed a military tradition within his family, his father and grandfather having served. And, like Newman, he joined prior to 9/11. “It was peacetime. The worst combat you would see was a bar fight in Australia,” he jokes. After 9/11, he was deployed to Iraq, completing three seven-month tours of combat duty as a ground intelligence analyst, which entailed “running around the battleground with my laptop and my shotgun.”

As a Marine, he witnessed a tragic accident and was required to inform an Iraqi family that their baby had died. “That was the hardest thing I’ve ever had to do. How do I put that experience in perspective and remember it and build from it, yet not let it influence me in a negative fashion?”

Therefore, joining the Marines “was the best and worst decision I’ve made. It shows you what you value: time, family, quiet.” Greenfield married his wife, Andrea, in 2006. Andrea is a 2006 graduate of the Orvis School of Nursing. **N**

—Melanie Robbins ’06.M.A.

*To donate to the Wolf Pack Veterans scholarship fund, please contact Stuart Greenfield at (775) 240-0599 or greenfieldsd@gmail.com.*

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