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# Foreign Correspondence

**EDUCATION OPPORTUNITIES BACK HOME  
GIVE DEPLOYED TROOPS NEW MEANING  
TO STUDY ABROAD.**

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In an old M\*A\*S\*H episode, the character Corporal O'Reilly, aka Radar, takes a creative writing course from the "Famous Las Vegas Writers School." The tongue-in-cheek depiction of a fly-by-night institution was just part of a long-standing Hollywood punch line and commentary on correspondence schools, with the additional insult of troops and institutions that provide services for those studying abroad. While such depictions have leaned toward the questionable, they also belie the reality of troops who study while deployed, and have been successfully doing so for years.

For more than a hundred years, soldiers, Marines, airmen and sailors have been advancing their educations while serving the country in some pretty inhospitable places. Today, such correspondence, overseas and deployment study practices are the education cornerstone for many military personnel, and it's growing by leaps and bounds. While it might seem daunting, many troops continue to study and earn degrees while deployed.

"The first correspondence course of the military was a U.S. Army course in logistics management out of the Philadelphia Army Depot, and from 1912 through the present day correspondence instruction is a mainstay of training [for] soldiers and Marines and airmen," said Michael P. Lambert, executive director of the Distance Education Training Council (DETC), a nonprofit association in Washington, D.C., which established to advance educational standards and ethical business practices within the correspondence field.

"They may call it distributed learning," he added. "The Army still calls it correspondence training; the Air Force called it extension instruction. I'm telling you, it works—every known research study done on it since 1920 says students learn the same as they would in the classroom."

## ***EDUCATIONAL RECONNAISSANCE***

Sergeant Justin Fanatia is currently deployed with the 111th Engineer Company, 1st Engineer Battalion, 555th Engineer Brigade, in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom. He spends his days



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conducting route clearance and reconnaissance operations in northern Iraq. He's also working toward a bachelor's degree in criminal justice through Grantham University, an online, distance-learning institution based in Kansas City.

"I plan to either stay with the federal government or apply my skills with explosives and infantry background as a combat engineer to either become [a Drug Enforcement Agency employee] or [part of] a SWAT team," he said. "The reason I am taking courses while deployed is to finish my education using Tuition Assistance from the Army. Also, with my focus only being on what I have to get done [while deployed], it helps with time."

Studying while deployed isn't without challenges, however. Fanatia said it's hard to get materials and Internet access at times, primarily because he's doing this work in the middle of an armed conflict. For example, he said, bases often fall under communication blackout conditions because of injuries, or worse, when families must be notified about an individual's condition or circumstance.

And, while Internet access is available in many places, it's not everywhere. "You always have to work ahead so [as] not to fall behind or fail, because we could get stuck somewhere for a good length of time," he said. "Finding the time is also hard because of patrols; when you have to be out every day to clear routes from roadside bombs to ensure the safe movements of other troops, it takes away from what you are trying to do."

He also said it can be difficult because of material limits—if information isn't readily available in a book or online. He believes it keeps him from his full potential. "Completing assignments is hard, not only because of limited resources but also because if there is something I need to ask about, I have to usually wait a day or two because of the time difference," he added. "I can ask a question in the morning here, and by the daytime there or night here when I am on patrols, the teacher finally gets the question."

Fanatia admits this kind of schooling isn't for everyone and insists that it's not just a matter of applying the material in front of him—limited as it can be. It's also a process of applying "a lot of skill and knowledge that you have gained over the years to help get you through it."

But there are some reassuring certainties. "At the end of the day, regardless of what happens here, I know that I am protecting my country and fighting for a just cause," he said. "If something were to happen to me and I didn't have any schooling, I wouldn't have anything to fall back on."

Schooling also helps with career advancement and promotions within the military itself. "It might take me a few years, but when I have completed my requirements for my degree, it will open new doors for me to get closer to those that I cherish most," Fanatia said. "I would definitely recommend this. I have also encouraged 14 people to enroll in classes so they get the same opportunities that I have been afforded."

## ***STATESIDE CONNECTIONS***

At Grantham University, the institution focuses heavily on faculty training to deal with the nuances and realities of military education and students who are taking courses from the other side of the globe.

"We like to get [our faculty] to know our soldiers," said Cheryl Hayek, Grantham's associate director of faculty. "We do that in our initial faculty training—they get a 'military culture 101.'"

She added that those who know the students better are more apt to help them, and over the past 10 years this has been crucial, as the online education industry has exploded. After 9/11, she noted, Congress passed legislation to give troops additional tuition assistance and re-emphasized military undergraduates, opening up new opportunities for troops to study while deployed and giving them something concrete to look forward to when they return home.

While there's a newness to many of these distance-learning opportunities, much of this has been around for years. Only in the last decade has technology substantially enhanced the process, providing more opportunities than ever before.

### CORRESPONDING OPPORTUNITIES

According to Lambert at DETC, the correspondence school history goes back to the 1870s. It's a process that continued to grow into the 20th century. After World War I, it escalated, with hundreds of correspondence schools dotting the country.

DETC was formed as the National Home Study Council (NHSC) and operated through a grant from the Carnegie Corporation beginning in 1926, according to Lambert.

"They were designed really to protect themselves from the fly-by-night schools in the country, and also to raise the standards in the field and to identify quality schools so that the public would enroll in confidence," he said. "In those days—in the '30s and

'40s—they worked closely with the Federal Trade Commission in promulgating some rules for marketing and for fair trade."

After World War II, Lambert said there were about 50 or 60 NHSC member schools. The emergence of the GI Bill and its expansion during the Korean War continued growth with correspondence schools and the ability for veterans to attend school.

He said there were ups and downs in the '70s, '80s and '90s because of "expansion or contraction of federal student aid." But over the past 20 years, many of the institutions improved tuition assistance programs. Add technology, the Internet, the ability for troops to enjoy occasional semblances of normalcy when off duty in places such as Iraq, and the distance doesn't seem that far. This has opened up more opportunities for military students to enhance their education.

### SERIOUS BUSINESS

Private 1st Class John M. Vaughan, another Grantham student, is currently working on his associate's degree in business management. He has also been deployed to Forward Operating Base Marez, Iraq.

"I have taken college courses before at previous schools; however, this is the first time I have ever taken online classes," he said. "I was nervous at first because I wasn't sure how well I was going to do, [but] I was actually surprised when I found out how simple and straightforward it was."

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He admitted that it's difficult to complete coursework while also completing missions, sleeping and performing other duties while deployed, but it's a way for him to have something to use when he re-enters the civilian world.

"Distractions are always present; something could always happen that could pull me away from my coursework, either for minutes or days at a time," he said. "As tough as it may be at times, all of these conditions don't add up to the satisfaction and gratification of knowing that I am only bettering myself and preparing myself for the future."

Despite the aforementioned and unfounded jabs that correspondence or distance learning courses have taken over the years, particularly for military personnel, it's become such a groundless joke amid the literally millions of successes, that the veneer, effectiveness and quality of such education continues to shine.

### LIFEBLOOD AND LONGEVITY

Lambert noted that 130 million Americans have taken correspondence courses over the last 140 years. That's nothing to laugh at, and frankly something he's sure should be admired.

"It, to me, is an adult way to learn—a person who is fairly disciplined and organized loves this way to learn," Lambert said. "Personally, I love this way to learn, and I don't need a lot of hand-holding; I don't need a lot of people bugging me with e-mails to study; I don't want to have that tight a schedule."

He also noted that the benefit of studying while deployed is its convenience—the ability of individuals such as Fanatia and Vaughan to complete their courses amid blackouts, roadside bomb detection and limits imposed by a forward operating base.

But students must still meet target dates. Lambert particularly noted federal aid rules that require quality contact between students and instructors weekly.

"There is structure, but within that structure the soldier, the Marine ... gets to decide when they're going to sit down and do their studies," he said.

The deployment phenomenon has driven hundreds of thousands of enrollments, and it's a market that's not going away. With troops shuttling back and forth from deployments overseas to home stations and then right back to a theater of operations, there will be a large number of them intent on the convenience and ability to study while deployed.

"Had we not been in these two wars in the Middle East, I don't think you'd see as many enrollments as you have today," Lambert said. "All of these young men and women coming in today—I'm talking about people in their 20s now—understand upfront the importance of getting more education and more training. I think the military fosters that, they encourage that." ★

For more information, contact Mark Fitzgerald at [markf@kmimediagroup.com](mailto:markf@kmimediagroup.com) or search our online archives for related stories at [www.MAE-kmi.com](http://www.MAE-kmi.com).

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