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Colby on the Front Lines: Graduates in the military tap into their liberal arts background

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UNITED STATES NAVY:
Lt. Ali Ghaffari '02



Lt. Ali Ghaffari '02, a Navy pilot at the controls of a F/A-18C Hornet fighter plane (above). Ghaffari flew missions from an aircraft carrier to protect ground troops in Afghanistan. At left, Ghaffari dons his gear in what is known as "the PR shop," short for parachute rigger, prior to a training run for carrier landings.

COLBY ON THE

Graduates in the military tap into their liberal arts background

FRONT ★ LINES

By Robin Respaut '07

As a pilot flying fighter jets from aircraft carriers, U.S. Navy Lt. Ali Ghaffari '02 spent much of 2008 protecting U.S. ground forces in Afghanistan. When U.S. troops were attacked, Ghaffari was among the pilots who flew low over enemy forces, driving them off.

A former professional triathlete who enlisted 11 years after graduation, Army Specialist Abe Rogers '95 deployed in 2007 to traverse the Afghan mountains in search of Taliban fighters and their hideouts. Rogers and his unit cut off supply routes, searched for Osama bin Laden, and along the way handed out humanitarian aid. Capt. Katlyn Shagory '05, an Army assistant brigade intelligence officer, first deployed to Baghdad in 2006. The assignment is now on her résumé: *Responsible for the management, training, welfare, and administrative actions of 20 personnel. Led a signals intelligence (SIGINT) mission, in northwest Baghdad, during the height of violence. ... Organized and executed over 75 SIGINT-driven combat missions.*



UNITED STATES ARMY:
Capt. Katlyn Shagory '05



U.S. Army Capt. Katlyn Shagory '05, an assistant brigade intelligence officer, during a deployment to Baghdad.



UNITED STATES ARMY:
2nd Lt. William D. Adams



2nd Lt. William D. Adams, now Colby's president, in a 1968 photograph taken in a helicopter flying across the Mekong Delta in Vietnam.



UNITED STATES ARMY:
Spc. Abe Rogers '95



Spc. Abe Rogers '95 providing security while fellow soldiers visit a police border patrol station outside of Jalalabad on the Pakistan-Afghanistan border in fall 2007.

These are just a few of the young Colby alumni who have been on the front-lines of America's wars. While the number is relatively small, college graduates are increasingly joining the military—up dramatically just last year, according to Army officials. And those Colbians in uniform say a liberal arts education—with its emphasis on problem solving and critical thinking—is valuable training for decision making that could be literally a matter of life and death. “My Colby education taught me how to think, how to analyze, how to read and research. I used all of that, and it led to my success,” said Shagory.

They trade a culture focused on individual expression and achievement for one built on teams and a hierarchical organization. Driven by patriotism, practicality, or a need for adventure, they move from the safe haven of a small college campus to places fraught with violence and suffering. “I guess it's a bond that you can't really know unless you are over there,” said Rogers. “You have guys to your left and your right who you most likely wouldn't have known before the Army. You definitely risk your life to try to save them, without question.”

Following the Vietnam War, military service became so unpopular among students that many colleges, including Colby, dropped

“My Colby education taught me how to think, how to analyze, how to read and research. I used all of that, and it led to my success.”

-Katlyn Shagory '05,
Army Captain



Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) programs. Some Colby graduates joined during those years, but, as President William D. Adams observed, there was a general lack of interest in military service on most campuses during that period.

Adams had reason to notice. An Army veteran, he served for a year as a military advisor in Vietnam. His job was to coordinate American air and artillery support and to advise South Vietnamese forces on combat operations. In Vietnam, Adams said, “I grew up fast.”

Fast forward to 9/11, when the mood on campuses changed. “I could hear students begin to talk about things differently,” said Adams. “I could hear students thinking, talking openly, about having military careers.”

In the intervening decade some of those students have gone beyond talking. Colbians who join the military are still a distinct minority. Incomplete Colby records, based partly on self-reporting, show about 50 alumni now on active duty. Many of those serving, including those in reserve and National Guard units activated for the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, do not inform the College of their military duties.

The number of new recruits in all branches of the U.S. military with two- or four-year college degrees increased last year by 17 percent. Approximately 6,400 of the total 168,000 recruits in 2009 had college degrees. Since 2001 the number of graduates of four-year colleges joining the Army each year has nearly tripled, from a little over 2,000 to more than 5,400 last year, according to Army figures.

The Army doesn't break the numbers down by types of colleges, much less separate alumni of selective liberal arts colleges. But Colby graduates who do choose the military agree on one thing: a liberal arts education can be an advantage.

Growing up in a military family, Shagory '05, the Army intelligence officer, decided early on to follow her father's path into the Army, but she wanted to attend college first. By choosing Colby, Shagory knew she would be in a minority on Mayflower Hill. "I was definitely a little bit nervous, because I knew Colby was a very liberal school," said Shagory, who returned from her second stint in Iraq in November. "But all of my friends were very supportive."

In Iraq, on her second deployment, she worked with five provincial governments and 140 provincial council members overseeing how they effected Army security operations. The job made Shagory grateful for her government major, she said, and for her knowledge of the ways government evolves as well as a government's shifting relationship to the people governed. "We had to adjust our thinking all the time."

Shagory, 27, who between deployments typically lives in a village near an Army base in Germany, said the military would benefit from more Colby graduates. The creative and analytical minds coming out of liberal arts schools, she said, are well suited to the type of military nation-building needed in Iraq and in Afghanistan. "The wars require people who can really think through problems. We always ask ourselves, 'What are the humanitarian projects we can do? How are we going to get the government functioning?'" Those are the issues facing Iraq right now," Shagory said. She plans to join the State Department or enter graduate school after she leaves the Army later this year.

President Adams, who holds a Ph.D. in philosophy, also believes the military has become less rigid since his own service, in Vietnam in the 1960s. As a lieutenant and advisor to South Vietnamese troops, he learned that the macro level is unquestionable to a soldier, he said, but the micro level is not. "Within that very broad array of things, there are a lot of independent judgments and decisions that need to be made professionally."

As a fighter pilot, Ghaffari knows about independent judgment, and he says the nature of the military and the lessons of a liberal arts college complement each other. "If I had gone to school and had a straight-up engineering background, I think I would be at a disadvantage," he said. "The military throws different things at you and sees if you can handle it. Colby does that too."

That propensity for critical thinking can, on occasion, unnerve high-ranking officers, but in the long run, a liberal arts graduate can greatly influence decisions on the battlefield, said U.S. Army Lt. Col. Pete Hayden '92, chief of foreign assistance law in Baghdad for U.S. forces in Iraq.

An attorney, Hayden reviews proposed expenditures of U.S. government funds in support of the Iraq Security Forces "to make sure it is spent the way Congress intended." A government and philosophy major at Colby, he has also served as an advisor to legal counsel to the Iraqi Ministry of Defense. "There is a little more reflection with a liberal arts background," Hayden said. "I think a little more broadly, and that may make you a little less decisive. But it means that you are, perhaps, a little less willing to pull the trigger unless you have considered what the downrange impact of your action will be."

The Public Side of a Private Person

CIA agent Elizabeth Hanson '02, killed in Afghanistan, was complex, passionate, "the shadow in the picture"

By Gerry Boyle '78

News reports described CIA agent Elizabeth Hanson '02 as a soft-spoken young woman who studied economics and Russian at Colby and who quietly set out on the path that would lead to her death.

Serious student? Yes, say her close Colby friends. Soft-spoken? No way.

"She was anything but quiet or soft-spoken," said Roary Stasko '99, who had known Hanson since she was a first-year living in East Quad. "She was loud and funny and goofy most of the time but also had a very serious side to her."

Her classmates' portrait of Hanson, who was killed along with six of her Central Intelligence Agency colleagues by a suicide bomber in Afghanistan Dec. 30, is of an exuberant, quirky, caring young woman who made friends quickly and moved easily among groups. "She really did know everybody on campus," said Lindsey Scott McGeehan '01, a close friend since freshman year. "But Elizabeth was actually very hard to get to know. A very friendly and warm and sweet personality—but also very guarded."

Those seemingly conflicting traits would suit Hanson's future career. In December, after her death, it was revealed that she was stationed at a CIA base in the mountains of eastern Afghanistan. She was killed when a man being cultivated as an informant was ushered into a meeting with CIA operatives. Instead of cooperating, he detonated a bomb he had concealed under his clothing.

McGeehan, a recruiter for a Boston consulting firm, said she only knew her longtime friend worked for the government and that she was in Afghanistan. But McGeehan said she wasn't surprised when Hanson's status with the intelligence agency was revealed. "The minute I heard it was Afghanistan and it was the CIA, I just knew without a doubt it was her," she said.

According to Stasko, a management consultant in the United Arab Emirates, Hanson was a social liberal, passionate about politics, and opinionated, and she enjoyed debating issues. "She came at things not from arguing a point, but questioning how anyone could take an opposing view. When you would challenge her, she would come back with points to support [her point of view]," Stasko said.

Hanson was organized and diligent in her studies, but attention deficit disorder, for which she took medication, meant academic success didn't come easily. "She struggled a lot," McGeehan said. "She couldn't sit still in the library. It wasn't easy for her to sit down with books." But Hanson's raw intelligence and drive carried her, she said, and likely propelled her career after Colby. "My guess is that she was just passionate about this, and it brought out the best side of her."



More on Elizabeth Hanson '02 at www.colby.edu/mag, keyword: Hanson

A scholarship fund has been established at Colby in honor of Elizabeth Hanson's life and in keeping with her wish to aid underprivileged students. To donate online go to www.colby.edu/campaign/endowment/hanson_fund.cfm, or search for Elizabeth Hanson on the Colby website. Checks can be sent to Colby College, c/o Chris Marden, 4345 Mayflower Hill, Waterville, ME 04901.



UNITED STATES ARMY: Staff Sgt. Jason Meadows '01



Staff Sgt. Jason Meadows '01, in Afghanistan in 2006, instructs Afghan National Army soldiers how to properly dispose of unexploded ordnance using explosives.



The connection between the seminar rooms on Mayflower Hill and the battlefield may seem hard to draw. But for some there are things about military life that aren't all that different from college. Marine 1st Lt. Joey Berg '06, an executive officer and fire support coordinator, spent three summers training with the Marines as an undergraduate and found that the transition wasn't difficult. "I was on the crew team," Berg said, "and the structure and discipline is similar to aspects of the military. You get up early, you do the workout, and then you do your job. You come to understand what the military

expects from you."

For others landing in the military can be jarring.

Ghaffari majored in biology and wanted to go to medical school. "A friend asked me how I would pay for it, and of course I didn't know. Then he said, 'Why don't you get the military to pay for it?'" Ghaffari had never considered military service, but, faced with impending loans, he went to a Navy recruiting office in Waterville as a senior, and later signed up for Officer Candidate School—surprising both his friends and himself, he said.

After graduation came OCS—13 weeks

of intensive training that could not have been more different from life at Colby. "They stripped all the independence you had in college," Ghaffari said. "We had to ask to go to the bathroom. We were screamed at. We were nothing. That was really hard for me. They have it down to a science on how to break you down so they can build you back up."

But there is a rationale behind the grueling process, Ghaffari said. "By the time you are done, you are a totally different person. You're more ingrained into the military mindset of teamwork and structure."

And you are connected to others who have undergone the same transformation. Ghaffari felt a bond even with troops he'd only seen below as he patrolled from the air. Sometimes, he said, the mere presence of fighter planes overhead was sufficient protection for troops on the ground. But one night a convoy of military transports that Ghaffari had been escorting regularly for weeks was ambushed. The attackers blew up a Humvee, killing a British soldier. "I never knew this man," Ghaffari said, "but at the same time, you have an immediate bond with the men on the ground. You're fighting for the same thing. You're working together. You're communicating with them. You're friends from the start."

Because of their extensive testing and training and "Top Gun" image, fighter pilots feel they are the military elite. It was easy for Ghaffari to make that assumption too, he said, until he began working with ground troops in Afghanistan. After the Humvee was bombed, Ghaffari's squadron mates located the bombers and killed them. But he was left with a new sense of the danger to which ground troops are exposed. "That was the first realization that [fighter pilots] are not the tip of the spear," he said. "We're supporting the guys on the ground. They may be in a

John Maddox '99: Healing the Wounded

In Iraq and Afghanistan, new medical technology and rapid-evacuation techniques have kept alive soldiers who would have died in earlier wars. Those who are injured are eventually put in the care of someone like Lt. John Maddox '99, M.D., a U.S. Navy surgeon attached to the Marine Corps 2nd Reconnaissance Battalion, based at Camp Lejeune in North Carolina. "War injuries are like no other," Maddox said. "The injuries are incredibly devastating."

After earning his medical degree at the Uniformed Services University in Bethesda, Md., Maddox began his work with war wounded at the

National Naval Medical Center there. Though the injuries Maddox sees may be physically crippling, they are not spirit-breaking, he said. In military hospitals, he has found, morale is consistently high.

"Often, when civilians are injured ... they assume the sick role," Maddox said, "whereas many of the wounded warriors—their lives had changed but the mental attitude was entirely different. They were healthy people who had been injured instead of injured people who were no longer healthy."

—R.R.



Academic aptitude needed as military emphasizes cultural assimilation

As a member of the Vermont National Guard, Matt Schofield '82 loved the activities offered. "We were doing a lot of neat stuff, like ice climbing, skiing, jumping out of helicopters. To be honest, [the military] sounded like it would be fun." He entered the Army as an Army Medical Service Corps officer nine years after graduating from Colby.

But he did not spend time "in the sandbox" until 2003, when the unit he commanded established a laboratory in Kuwait to provide identification of weapons-of-mass-destruction materials. Another portion of the unit accompanied troops in Iraq.

Today Schofield is an Army colonel and president of the U.S. Army Medical Department Board, an independent agency that oversees medical care for the Army, from

the battlefield to U.S. hospitals and other health-care providers.

Schofield said he's seen changes in the needs and expectations of the military over the course of his career. He remembered a saying from his early years in the Army. "One of the best identifiers that a West Point cadet is not going to make it," the old saw said, "is a verbal SAT score of 750 or better," suggesting that academically oriented cadets were more likely to chafe under a strict military regimen.

That mindset has changed, Schofield said. "About three or four years ago, the Army leadership came out with a model, not just to combat with arms, but to assimilate with other cultures and to recognize the limitations of technology."

—R.R.



UNITED STATES ARMY:
Col. Matt Schofield '82,
Medical Service Corps Officer



Col. Matt Schofield, right, with the 520th Theater Army Medical Laboratory detachment, in Kuwait in 2003. Schofield commanded the unit as it searched for weapons of mass destruction.

convoy or an outpost, but they are surrounded by people who want to do them harm. I have a huge deal of respect for them."

He recalled another night when a group of Marines was attacked. "We got overhead and the firing stopped. The militants had scattered." Ghaffari radioed down to the Marines that the coast was clear.

"Can you imagine trying to fall asleep after that?" said Ghaffari, now a flight instructor in Mississippi. "They were completely alone. ... Those guys are true heroes."

Abe Rogers '95 was a guy on the ground. His missions lasted up to seven weeks in bitter cold and stifling heat, sleeping in the open or under Humvees. "You don't get much sleep out there anyway," he said.

Rogers had men in his unit who were killed and injured as their vehicles tripped the mines that litter the landscape in Afghanistan. "If there was ever a loss of life or a serious injury, then that really sinks in pretty quick," he said. This year he is working toward a master's in education at Boston University on the G.I. Bill, but he could be called back to Afghanistan at any time. Last fall two of Rogers's former unit members went missing in Afghanistan. (The bodies of both men have since been found.) In January a Humvee in his unit struck a roadside bomb, seriously injuring five soldiers. In February another roadside bomb killed one of Rogers's friends.

"Once you've been a part of that war, you feel somewhat connected to it," Rogers said. "And, as long as it is still going on, there is a

part of me that still wants to be over there, especially when you get news like that." Loyalty to his fellow soldiers eventually overwhelmed Rogers. After the initial interview for this article, he reported back that he had joined the Massachusetts National Guard. He expects to deploy with an infantry unit to Afghanistan in August. Once again, Rogers will trade one type of education for another.

In facing death, Rogers is certainly not alone. Most of the alumni interviewed for this article had seen death on the battlefield. None wanted to talk about it.

An Army combat engineer, Army Staff Sgt. Jason Meadows '01 spent more than two years in Iraq and in Afghanistan, scouring the landscape for IEDs (improvised explosive devices). Meadows said the job required "really good eyes and heavily armored vehicles."

"It's a really stressful job," he said. "During the bad times, every day we hit things. Our trucks got blown up. A lot of the job is just luck, let's put it that way."

Meadows lost two friends in Iraq. "It wasn't pretty for a while," he said. "They have counselors over there to help out. A lot of people sat down and talked to them. We got a day off, and then we went back to work."

Despite exposure to danger and death in war, Colby veterans interviewed didn't demonize the enemy or oversimplify other cultures. Hayden, the military attorney, explained that many Iraqis' concerns are based on their ethnicity, regional loyalties, or their jobs. "There are all kinds of interests

pressing on these guys, but so many of them want to do the right thing for their country," Hayden said.

In the mountains of Afghanistan, Rogers also challenged himself to understand Afghans' viewpoints. "They may be loosely affiliated with the Taliban, but they weren't really interested in being affiliated with them," Rogers said. "Part of our goal is to maybe convince [the ones] who may be on the fence that they should be on the side of their Afghan government."

Ghaffari received daily intelligence briefings that taught him that the conflict is complex. Even only seeing his adversaries from the cockpit, he understood that they were human beings, he said. "You don't necessarily vilify who you are fighting...," he said. "I realize that they probably have wives and children and parents. They are most likely more similar to us than they are different."

It's an ability to consider other viewpoints that was honed half a world away. While Ghaffari considered the militants the enemy, he said, at the same time he felt, in a way, the two sides were fighting for the same reason. "You are fighting for what is right," he said. "I don't understand their methods. But I do think it's important to see both sides."

Robin Respaut '07 is a freelance journalist and producer for New Hampshire Public Radio, working on a show called Word of Mouth. More at www.robinrespaut.com. C