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

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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.
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.

By Robin Respaut ’07
These are just a few of the young Colby alumni who have been on the frontlines 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 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.

“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

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

“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.”

“2nd Lt. William D. Adams”
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.”
he 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.”

A nd 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

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.”

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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 chasing under a strict military regimen. “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.”