Veterans' Paths Cross During Military Service, Careers at UA

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Veterans Day has special significance for two UA employees – Alex Blandeburgo and Jeffrey Fehmi, veterans whose paths crossed not just on campus but also during their careers in the U.S. Army and Army Reserve.

"I initially enlisted in the Army Reserve in 1986 and received training as an interior electrician," said Blandeburgo, director of housing and residential facilities at the UA. "I attended Officer Candidate School and was commissioned a second lieutenant as an intelligence officer in the Army National Guard in 1992."

Blandeburgo completed several training programs related to military intelligence, and graduated from the Army Command and General Staff College. One of his instructors there was Fehmi, who is a professor in the UA School of Natural Resources and the Environment in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences.

"He was on the faculty, so he would do presentations on particular coursework. He was very knowledgeable," Blandeburgo recalled. "He was a good mentor as an officer."

Blandeburgo stuck out in Fehmi's mind for another reason.

"The big thing I remember about him was he was quite a ham," Fehmi said with a laugh. "During graduation, he actually did the finger gun move and made the 'click click' noise on stage before going up to get his certificate."

Between active and reserve duty, Blandeburgo served for 27 years, retiring from the Army Reserve in 2013 as a lieutenant colonel. Fehmi retired from the Army Reserve in May 2016, also as a lieutenant colonel. Both men already were UA employees – Blandeburgo joined the University in 2002 and Fehmi in 2005 – when they were deployed and took leaves of absence to actively serve their country.

"I served as both a company commander and deputy brigade commander in Reserve units and participated in two major training exercises on the Korean Peninsula," said Blandeburgo, whose deployments totaled 29 months. "I also served on active duty as the theater intelligence chief in Fort Shafter, Hawaii, in support of Operation Enduring Freedom, and as the deputy corps intelligence chief in Al-Faw Palace, Baghdad, Iraq, in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom."

Blandeburgo received several military commendations including the Bronze Star Medal, Meritorious Service Medal and Army Commendation Medal. Fehmi, also a decorated veteran whose awards include the Bronze Star Medal, Meritorious Service Medal, Global War on Terrorism Expeditionary Medal and Iraq Campaign Medal, began his military career in the
Army Reserve Officers' Training Corps at Rutgers University.

"I served as an engineer officer for 28 years, including at the Pentagon, and in the Ukraine, Afghanistan and Iraq," said Fehmi, whose deployments lasted about 18-19 months. "I enjoyed my service because of all of the interesting people around me, as well as the travel to places I otherwise would have never seen."

With their military careers following similar paths and even intersecting briefly, it wasn't too surprising that Blandeburgo and Fehmi both ended up at the UA.

"One day, I was walking on Highland Avenue and we ran into each other, recognized each other and started talking," Blandeburgo said. "I just ran into another veteran the other day. He helps advise graduate students. It's important for people to recognize there are veterans everywhere."

The UA will be closed Nov. 10 in observance of Veterans Day, which is Nov. 11.

Blandeburgo and Fehmi say their military service prepared them well for their jobs at the UA.

"The preparation I got from the Army that benefited my job at the UA could be best summarized as 'be early, work hard and watch out for your team,'" Fehmi said.

"Teamwork, selfless service, commitment, loyalty and honesty are just a few of the values and skills that I attribute to my service in the military," Blandeburgo added. "Whether you serve in the military or work at the UA, our successes or failures are a result of how well we work together with others, our demonstrated ability to get things done and our honesty, particularly while serving in positions of leadership. I attribute my success as a leader at the UA to the leadership training and opportunities afforded to me in the Army."

Teamwork is also a core value for the UA Veterans Education and Transition Services, which helps student veterans through academic and workforce success programs. The office also helps them apply for benefits through the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs and provides assistance in finding scholarships.

Many of the services also are available to UA employees who are veterans, said Cody Nicholls, assistant dean of students for military and veteran engagement.

"While student success is an important part of VETS, we've also helped UA employees understand and apply for the VA benefits they are eligible for," said Nicholls, a veteran of the Army Reserve and Wyoming National Guard. "We are here to help all veterans."

Opportunities are also available for veterans to volunteer and mentor other veterans through VETS. For more information, contact Nicholls at 520-626-7154 or rcn1@email.arizona.edu.

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