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Farmers Fight

Texas A&M's Long And Mutually Beneficial Relationship With The U.S. Armed Services

Oct. 4, 1876, when classes first started at Texas A&M, Reveille was nothing more than a wake-up call. “Howdy” was not yet the official greeting. Yell practice wouldn’t come until 1913. Yet a tradition was already starting in the place not yet called Aggieland. The first public institution of higher education in Texas would be run as a military institution. While military service long ago became optional for Aggies, the bonds between Texas A&M and the U.S. armed forces continue to strengthen.

By Stephanie Jeter '06
Photography By Jim Lyle



The words “service” and “sacrifice” are used pervasively in our culture. Whether on purpose or by accident, these heavy words are tossed lightly into ordinary conversation about ordinary things that require an ordinary response. But not in Aggieland. Here, such words are engraved in stone memorials and their meanings are engraved in Aggies’ beating hearts.

For as long as there has been a Texas A&M, military service has been part of its framework: Aggies joining the military, and veterans coming home and becoming Aggies. The two mesh beautifully, said Maj. Glenn Burnside '73, assistant commandant for admissions support. As institutions, the military and Texas A&M share the same familial pattern of tradition and honor-driven core values: excellence, integrity, leadership, loyalty, respect and selfless service. “It’s in the level of commitment,” Burnside said. “In the military we say, ‘I want to serve,’ and wanting to serve goes back to the very heart of A&M—selfless servant.”

There are other commonalities, said Col. Gerald Smith '82, professor of naval science. Once an Aggie, always an Aggie. Inside the phrase is an inseparable family unit, because Aggies know something the rest of the world doesn’t. “There’s nothing I can tell you about being part of the Aggie family,” he said. It’s something you have to experience, and in the armed forces, “it’s very much the same,” he said.

In Aggieland, sacrifice is never considered forfeiture. Graduates leave trained for anything, whether civilian or military service.

Military service was part of A&M’s very founding purpose, history

records. And in the 133 years since the dawn of the University, that connection helped create a world-class institution out of a young school on an empty prairie, where wolves once scratched at the doors.

Campus is now a much different place than it was in the 1870s, but sometimes you have to go back in the archives to see how things come full circle, said Sarah Minnis, Veterans Services Office program coordinator.

Though the past is gone, it continues to affect who you are in the present, she said.

The Past

Texas A&M got its initial footing from the first Morrill Act. Named after the Vermont representative who introduced the bill in 1857, the act granted federal land for colleges where “the leading object shall be, without excluding other scientific and classical studies and including military tactics, to teach such branches of learning as are related to agriculture and the mechanic arts.”

Many decisions were made during the first days of the A&M College of Texas, and the black and white pictures give a glimpse of how A&M interpreted its call. Military training was made mandatory at A&M and Aggies have served and sacrificed in





Help Available From A&M's Veteran Services Office

- How to use your GI bill.
- How to certify your educational benefits.
- Information about Hazlewood Exemption for Texas residents who receive less than full tuition with the GI bill.
- Referrals to other campus offices and resources.
- Veterans' orientation and ongoing workshops.
- Assistance with evaluating transfer coursework for your chosen degree plan.
- Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) workshops.
- How to apply for scholarships and financial aid.
- How to apply for student employment.

After high school, Kathryn Perry '10 did a hitch in the U.S. Coast Guard, then she followed a superior's advice and enrolled at Texas A&M's Galveston campus. While still a junior, she became the captain of the Galveston campus' Corps of Cadets. And after graduation, she hopes to serve in the U.S. Army in one of its maritime fields. Gerald Smith '82 is a professor of naval science at Texas A&M and a colonel in the U.S. Marine Corps. He says that veterans typically make excellent students at A&M: "They're very much focused on specific goals." And it is easier for those veterans to integrate into the University's culture when there are other veterans and servicemembers to connect with and programs in place to help them adjust.

Military Research At A&M

There's another side to A&M's partnership with the military: "There's a tremendous amount of money in research," said General Joe Weber '72. From materials for protective clothing to advancements in homeland security, research is widely varied in its focus. See Page 34 to read about a \$9.9 million grant to the Texas A&M Institute for Preclinical Studies to develop new frontline treatments for injured service members. The Integrative Center for Homeland Security is at Texas A&M, as well. And see Page 17 to read about how the Texas A&M Health Science Center's Rural and Community Health Institute helped create a first-of-its-kind electronic tracking method for documenting battlefield trauma.

every U.S. conflict since the Spanish-American War. And while military training stopped being required of a Texas A&M graduate in 1965, military service continues as one of the strongest identifiers of the University.

Fifty-five trees line Simpson Drill Field on campus, one for each Aggie who gave his life in service to country during World War I. The Handbook of Texas recounts that by 1918, 49 percent of A&M graduates were in military service, with more than 1,200 of those serving as commissioned officers. And during World War II, A&M provided more military personnel, counting both enlisted and officers, than any other institution. Seven of those men earned the Medal of Honor, the highest award given to American military personnel. Replicas of all seven medals, along with tales of their heroism and an etching, are on display in Rudder Exhibit Hall until MSC construction is complete. Since 1876, Texas A&M has produced more than 43,000 commissioned officers serving in all branches of the armed services, of whom more than 225 have reached the rank of general or flag officer. Even today, Texas A&M commissions more officers to the U.S. armed forces than any university outside the military academies. *Texas Aggie* receives dozens of pictures every month of Ags serving America in the armed forces, with backgrounds as varied as sand and sea.

Which is why, when veterans or active-duty personnel start looking for a university where they can extend their training with a degree, Texas A&M is trying its best to be the one that extends its hand the farthest, said Gen. Joe Weber '72, vice president of Student Affairs.

"Our University is well-known for its excellence," said Weber who also serves on the Naval Research Advisory Committee, and it's because Texas A&M prepares its students like no other school. Texas A&M makes the superlative lists often, said Weber—the lists that pronounce A&M as a top university either because of its research, faculty accomplishments, or because of how much money its

graduates make. "But the greatest success of a university isn't some list," he said. "It's in the accomplishments of its graduates."

In 36 years of service to the Marine Corps, Weber said, he's seen the way former students of Texas A&M tackle jobs. Aggies believe there's nothing they can't do, he said. They are able to handle and successfully manage more than one task at a time. "And Aggies always volunteer for the tough jobs," he said. Aggies represent excellence because they strive for excellence.

So when Weber arrived on campus in 2008 as a vice president, knowing what Aggies could do and the kind of person who graduates from Texas A&M, he said he was surprised to find that A&M wasn't listed as "military friendly."

More than surprise, his first response was one of confusion.

"Military friendly" is a title bestowed upon certain colleges annually by G.I. Jobs magazine. Not having that designation changed nothing, Weber said. It didn't take away from A&M's history or what the University does for veterans. But this is Texas A&M, he said. Our relationship to the military is a key part of who we are, and veterans and active military personnel are understood and appreciated here, Weber said. "This is a great campus for them." And as thousands of veterans or active service military personnel prepare to use their GI educational benefits, "we've got to be ready for them," Weber said.

A short history of the original GI Bill: At its highest point, veterans accounted for 49 percent of college admissions in 1947, said the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. By the end of the original GI Bill, on July 25, 1956, the department said that 7.8 million of 16 million World War II veterans had participated in some sort of education or training program.

"That was visible at A&M where a large cadre of veterans came here after the war," Weber said. His Class of 1950 father was among them, a "typical WWII vet," Weber said. He flew for the Navy and graduated with his degree in mechanical engineering.

The original G.I. Bill was revolutionary in its time, but Minnis said the most recent GI bill offers more—much more—to servicemen and women. As such, “This is the most educated veteran population since World War II,” she said.

The Present

If an identifying characteristic of A&M is excellence, then it was time to translate that trait to how the University welcomes military servicemen and women, Weber said. “With this new GI Bill, they can go anywhere,” he pointed out. It was about two years ago that committees formed to bring faculty, staff, ROTC and Corps of Cadets representatives together to sit and identify initiatives that would do more to welcome and attract America’s veterans as Aggies, because the University wants them here.

“We’ve always had a financial aid advisor to work with vets,” someone who could certify veteran benefits, Minnis said. But, as for specialized service to this special group, Minnis said, so much has changed. “We now have an actual Veterans Services Office, and we work hard to be a central point of expertise,” Minnis said.

Cause and effect—Texas A&M was named “military friendly” by GI Jobs. And a year ago, all the member schools of The Texas A&M University System achieved full “military friendly” status from the Servicemembers Opportunity Colleges, which sets national standards for the designation.

As the Veterans Services Office program coordinator, Minnis is no

Connecting With Other Veterans

- TAMU Veterans Association is a student-run organization in which veterans can connect with other veterans on campus while participating in social and community service activities. For more information, contact the Veteran Services Office.
- Delta Company is a veteran-only unit in Corp of Cadets.
- V-1 is a unique outfit in the Corps of Cadets that is available to adapt to cadets’ individual needs and backgrounds, including veterans, reservists, National Guard, married, international, and varsity athletes.



Just days after posing for these photos, U.S. Navy Ensign Daniel Canizales '09, a former A&M cadet, left College Station to begin training for Basic Underwater Demolition School. Upon completion of BUDS, jump school and additional training, he will receive a trident insignia identifying him as a U.S. Navy SEAL, among the most elite of the world’s fighting forces.

The Hazlewood Act

The Hazlewood Act provides qualified veterans, their spouses and children with an education benefit of up to 150 hours of tuition and fee exemptions at state-supported colleges or universities. Effective with the fall 2009 term/semester, in order to be eligible to receive a Hazlewood Act Exemption, a veteran must:

- Have been a Texas resident upon entry into the military, entered the service in the state of Texas, or declared Texas as his or her home of record.
- Have a military discharge of honorable or general, under honorable conditions.
- Served at least 181 days of active duty service (excluding training).
- Not be in default on an education loan made or guaranteed by the state of Texas and not be in default on a federal loan if that default is the reason the student cannot use his or her federal veterans' benefits.

For more information on the GI Bill, contact the Veterans Service Office at (979) 845-8075

Maj. Christy Gantt '86 has both bachelor's and master's degrees from A&M. In addition to being a wife, mother and U.S. Army Reservist, she also is a physical therapist, teaches at Blinn College, and is a member of the Corps commandant's staff at A&M.



longer surprised when her phone rings and the caller identifies as a soldier calling from Afghanistan or Iraq. It's not easy to get a call out from a battle zone, so Minnis works hard to be the best resource for all questions.

Veterans are immensely different from the traditional college student, Minnis said. Instead of completing their application for admission on a home computer or in a library, many of these prospective students fill out their applications in fits and starts, perhaps tapping on a laptop while hunkered down in a tank, she said. As veterans, they have a unique set of needs. From new SAT requirements to not having enough hours to be a transfer student, because of the nature of what a veteran is, these students need a university that is aware of their challenges, she said.

Making it easier for veterans to navigate the admissions process is important, but when Burnside looks out his office window, he sees the greatest reason why veterans should come to Aggieland: "A&M remembers," he said.

Take a drive around campus. The flags fly; the monuments memorialize. Here, the past is remembered. Heroes are honored. And the future is protected, not just in words, but in action. In Aggieland, service is a verb. Silver Taps reminds young Aggies that even they are vulnerable, he said. Muster is about respect and reflection.

There's an engraving inside the MSC that lists the Aggies who died in service during WWII, and Burnside's uncle, Texas A&M Class of 1940, is among those memorialized. "Yet, if you take some first-generation Aggie on this campus who doesn't know the stories," Burnside said, someone who doesn't look at the ground and imagine his own father walking across the turf, "it still doesn't take long to pick up on it." Texas A&M and Texas Aggies can relate to those in military service, Burnside said, because so much of this place is about remembering "those who have gone before."

The Future

Texas A&M is a place like no other, said Gregory Wilson '10, president of the Student Veteran's Association. A first-generation Aggie and a combat veteran, he was drawn to Texas A&M because of academics and a dream of working in international agriculture.

Wilson is a man of verbs, action words that result in completed tasks. That's how others describe him, as "a guy who's really getting issues out there," Minnis said, "a real go-to guy," according to Burnside.

He single-mindedly chased an education from A&M from thousands of miles away through the clicks of a mouse. After seeing the state of agriculture in Afghanistan, the study of "agronomy chose me," he said. "Being there, it was so easy to connect the dots." He could see it with his own eyes, hear it in the crack of a weapon. Lack of food and money in Afghanistan can lead to terrorist activity because there's protection inside a terrorist group. After a series of ambushes, "I told myself that if I make it out, I'm going to school," he said. Wilson knew he wanted to go to a Texas school because of the Hazlewood Act, a state initiative that provides qualified veterans, their spouses and children with up to 150 hours of tuition and fee exemptions at state-supported schools. Internet searches of in-state schools clued him into the work of Norman Borlaug, one of Texas A&M's Nobel laureates and namesake of the Norman Borlaug Institute of International Agriculture. He knew of A&M's military ties.

He soon knew that he wanted to be an Aggie.

It wasn't the smoothest road, he said. Dated SAT scores, a not-quite-there GPA and a lacking number



Maj. Eddie Lee Felder, Jr. '83 retired from the U.S. Air Force in 2006 after 23 years of active service. He is now director of human resources for the Bryan Independent School District. He and his wife, Valerie Dian Felder, have nine children, including Eddie Lee Felder III '10, with whom he is pictured on the cover of this issue. Eddie III is a senior in the Corps of Cadets and plans to join the military after graduation.

The Post 9/11 GI Bill

- Eligible with at least 90 aggregate days of service or 30 days of active duty service with a disability discharge.
- Benefits based on length of service; maximum benefit paid for at least 36 months of active duty service or 30 days of active duty service with a disability discharge.
- Tuition and mandatory fees paid to Texas A&M, and in some cases a monthly housing allowance and annual book stipend.

For more information on the GI Bill, contact the Veterans Service Office at (979) 845-8075.

Veteran Faculty And Staff

Another connection between A&M and the U.S. military is in the many veterans who work for the University as faculty or staff.

One such veteran is Russ Graves '80, who earned an undergraduate degree at A&M, completed a master's elsewhere and then came back to earn a doctorate in educational psychology. He served in the U.S. Air Force after graduation, retiring from that service in 1996. At A&M, he is director of the General Academic Programs Department and the designated academic advisor for military veterans.

"We're such a patriotic place," the third-generation Aggie said. "These individuals have earned these educational benefits, and since they do have educational benefits, what better place to use their benefits than at Texas A&M?"

Shared Goals In Afghanistan

Many Aggies who aren't in uniform still work in close cooperation with the U.S. military. In Afghanistan, for example, Dr. Michael Jacobs and Dr. Catherine Schloeder of the Department of Ecosystem Science and Management work to improve prospects and reduce conflicts for the Kuchi people.

Their name literally means "to move," Jacobs said. But with no land and a limited memory of life without conflict, the nomadic Kuchi are impoverished, their system of agriculture flawed, and—due to a lack of education—the chance of changing the future is low.

But with help from Jacobs and Schloeder, the Kuchi are discovering leadership, gaining knowledge and reducing the risk associated with livestock production in Afghanistan. Through the Afghanistan PEACE Project—Pastoral Engagement, Adaptation and Capacity Enhancement—Jacobs and Schloeder provide information on forage conditions and market prices, promote livestock diversification, teach conflict resolution, and train in business practices.

The Kuchi are nomadic, and for the most part not respected, Jacobs said. Yet they play a leading role in Afghanistan's agricultural industry. Representing only 5 percent to 8 percent of the population, the Kuchi produce about 70 percent of livestock in the country.

The Kuchi take their animals to the mountains in the summer and the lowlands in the winter, but the routes aren't easy to navigate. Paths have been plowed for crops and access to grazing lands has been refused, he said. Fights over land can easily ignite. "That's why this project was built with a conflict resolution program," Jacobs said.

"It can be done. I'm certain of it now. We've had so many workshops—close to 25 or 27—where we've brought these people together and talked about things," he said. "They want it."

Jacobs, speaking by phone from Afghanistan, said they work independently of the U.S. military, but there have been times when the military can go places they can't to complete surveys.

If the project succeeds, it should mean a more peaceful and more prosperous Afghanistan. It's just one of many ways in which civilian Aggie researchers are pursuing goals that mesh with the objectives pursued by the U.S. military.

of credits he'd accumulated during his years as a paratrooper made it so he started his college career at a junior college. That's a situation that the University is now trying to prevent, Smith said. "They're out there defending America, that's why they haven't taken the SAT in four or five years," Smith said. "There are some great prospective students out there that wouldn't have gotten a second look originally." Now aware of the extenuating circumstances, the University has started identifying veterans as veterans during the admissions process, Smith said.

Once admitted, these veterans arrive at Texas A&M with a pounding heart and a squall in their stomach. It's not that they don't know what to do. "No, that's not it," Minnis said. It's just that these men and women have been conditioned by the military to follow orders. "For some of them, they are just a week out of being told where to go, when to go, how to go and what they should do when they get there," she said. "It's not an issue that they're not thinking, there's lots of thinking, but they're missing that structure."

Wilson agreed: "Veterans want to know the best way to do something, so they want to ask someone who's already done it." To help with that, the University is working to create a mentor program especially for veterans, even recognizing that veterans who experienced combat most likely would want to pair with a similar mentor.

The first semester is the hardest, Minnis said. "It's like a tree," Minnis said. "We want to get our veterans planted and to get them to spread their roots in as many directions as they can across campus." The University is also working on changes to its New Student Conferences to be more military friendly. It's working with Student Activities to have programs especially for veterans, Minnis said. The pattern of pairing with other offices continues across campus. "The great thing about it is we don't have to reinvent the wheel," she said. Veterans are becoming a more prominent voice on campus simply by being included in the events of other campus offices.

The University has much to gain in recruiting these men and women to be Aggies, Minnis said. They have life experience. “These are students who have had many different jobs in the military,” she said. They are high energy and motivated. “They’re very much focused on specific goals, and they know that they’re doing something challenging,” Smith said.

The varied experiences of veterans make it so they can identify their own faults, and “it’s easier to overcome when you can identify your faults,” he said. “That’s the thing about a veteran. You’ve started so much, but you’ve also completed so much.”

Having more veterans on campus, and making it easier for them to integrate into the culture, is of great benefit to the University, Weber said. In being present, veterans are able to show cadets what it’s really like to serve, said Smith. By their pride, veterans are shining examples of the Aggie Spirit, Minnis said. By being active, veterans can make a difference on this deep and wide campus, Burnside said. Just by joining a club or classroom discussion, Wilson said, traditional students can learn from their discipline.

“If you’ve ever seen a veteran on the first row of a classroom, challenging the professor—and by challenging him, pushing him to teach better, not worried about what anyone else in the class thinks—you’ll know what veterans bring to the classroom,” Wilson said.

As Texas A&M moves forward as a successful and sought-after university, Wilson said A&M will thrive amid the change. This university can accept change and it can continue with excellence and it can lead others in excellence. A&M has a military order to keep marching and improving.

Past, present and future—a relationship with the military is an honor Texas A&M has had since the beginning. 🇺🇸

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Joe Weber '72 (right) attained the rank of brigadier general in the U.S. States Marine Corps before retiring and returning to his alma mater as vice president of student services. He says the helmet he is holding in the photo saved his life many times during the Vietnam War, while the hat is from his time in A&M's Corps of Cadets. Charles Stasny '44 (left) is a U.S. Navy veteran of World War II. The frame he's holding in the picture contains medals and insignia from his time in the service. For more about Stasny, see the Parting Shot on Page 104.

