

SIUE ROTC cadets show their love for the military and country

by Patricia Merritt

November 10 2016 8:46 AM



EDWARDSVILLE - Whether it was battling rushing waters in a small raft with a guide who spoke no English, jumping out of an aircraft at 1,450 feet or helping out in a West African's women's shelter, Southern Illinois University Edwardsville Army Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) cadets embraced their assignments with passion and excitement.

After returning this summer from extended military-related abroad training, five SIUE ROTC cadets reflected on their travels and mission in light of Veterans Day, Friday,

Nov. 11. The following SIUE ROTC senior cadets were selected to participate in the specialized training of Culture Understanding and Language Proficiency (CULP), Cadet Training Leadership Training (CTLT) and Airborne School: Jacob Bloch, Justin Bristol, Lucas Smith, Angela Swenson and Blake Varady.

“About 10,000 cadets nationwide attend Cadet Summer Training, and of those, 25 percent are selected to participate in CULP, CTLT and Airborne School,” said Lt. Col. Scott Reed, professor of military science and SIUE ROTC commander. “The training is designed to train young cadets to become officers. Each of these cadets is an excellent leader. I would not hesitate to have them as platoon leaders in my unit.”

Swenson, an exercise science major, traveled to Jince, Czech Republic. Part of her CULP training during the trip included water rafting.

“We had to maneuver the raft, and make sure we did not flip it,” said Swenson. “In the raft, there was just a sports instructor, who did not speak any English but ‘go’ and ‘stop,’ and myself. I learned more about teamwork and how important communication is. If you didn’t work together as a team, you could go in circles or wreck the raft.”

Varady, a political science major, spent his 21 days in CULP at the Chorillos Military Academy in Peru. Varady and his platoon interacted and trained with the academy.

“I believe we were the first American ROTC group to go to Peru. They were very receptive, and their treatment of us was amazing,” Varady said. “I couldn’t have asked for a better host country. I had a perception that their military would be less professional than ours. It was not. They model themselves after the U.S. military. All of the people I spoke to had a deep love for their military and their country. They wanted to serve their country as opposed to wanting their military to do something for them.”

Bloch, a criminal justice major, did CULP training with a foreign military academy in the West African country of Burkina Faso.

“This mission was a life changing experience. I had a lot of fun while also learning about how another nation conducts training, teaches discipline and conducts operations,” Bloch said. “Not only did we get a chance to learn about the Burkinabe military, but we also were able to help out surrounding communities. We visited a shelter for women who were sick and brought their children. We hung a tire swing for the children, because they didn’t have many toys, and most of the mothers could not play with their children because of illnesses they had contracted.”

Smith, a computer engineering major, went to Fort Hood, Texas, for CTLT that involved tanks and other armored vehicles.

“It was a desert with a whole bunch of tanks. It was my first exposure to tanks,” Smith said, who wants to be an armor officer. “But it was a great experience. The people on the base were great. What I like about the military is that it builds a sense of brotherhood and comradery that you can’t quite find anywhere else. I also found the training to be extremely helpful.”

Bristol’s assignment took him to airborne school in Fort Benning, Ga.

“My experience is one that I will never forget,” said the criminal justice major. “I learned the proper parachute landing falls, combat jumps and parachute recovery. My first jump at 1,450 feet was probably the most frightening thing I have ever done in my life. When you leave the aircraft, you are flying at about 150 mph, and you are on the ground in less than 45 seconds.”

All the cadets plan to be active military once they graduate. It’s a career choice, they say, they’ve always had. It is also the cadets’ way of honoring the legacy of U.S. military service.

“Veterans were willing to risk it all for every citizen, so we need reach back and pay them respect,” said Smith. He also noted that his great grandfather, great uncle, grandfather and uncle also served in the military.

“I have deep respect for our veterans,” Varady said. He added that his great grandfather, Albert Laubenthal, fought in World War II. His great uncle, Louis Varady, fought in World War I, and his crew’s canon was the first American shot during the war. Varady said the canon is display at the West Point Museum.

“I’m grateful for all the veterans who lost their lives while serving and those that have served,” said Swenson. “I think everyone should care because they fought for our freedoms. We have a lot of freedoms in this country that other cultures do not have. We are still progressing, and there is always room for more progression. But we should still be thankful to live in such a great country.”

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