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Veterans at University Offer Different Perspectives for Students, Faculty

By Jim Clark

UCF Forum columnist

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As students flood the campus to begin the new school year, there is one group that offers a unique—and welcome—point of view to discussions of war and peace: veterans who have experienced firsthand the fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan, seen the rising tensions in South Korea, or served on ships dispatched to the latest world hot spots.

When wars are discussed in my history courses, the veterans can turn a dry lecture about Iraq or Afghanistan into an exciting discussion. Plus, they can give a real-world view for other students who have not had the same experiences.

When a student recently complained about finding a parking space on campus, a veteran spoke up and said that just months earlier he was driving a tank through enemy fire in Afghanistan. He joked that driving around looking for a parking space was almost a pleasure.

He is just one of the nearly 2,000 veterans at the University of Central Florida who offer those different perspectives for students and the faculty

Since the university began in 1963, UCF has been a magnet to veterans. The school immediately attracted active-duty personnel from both the Orlando Naval Training Center and Patrick Air Force Base south of Cocoa Beach. During the Vietnam War, many colleges displayed animosity toward active-duty soldiers and veterans, and some banned military recruiters from campus.

But UCF welcomed the veterans—and their numbers here swelled. For me as a child of the 1960s, it is refreshing to see the respect they have now from other students.

When I began teaching at UCF in 1987, there were still some older student veterans from the Vietnam War, and a few years later they were joined by veterans of the Gulf War, fought to reclaim Kuwait from the invading Iraqi army.

Orlando's population was exploding, and thousands of veterans moved to Florida seeking jobs or to retire. Many decided to start—or in some cases finish—their education at UCF. To accommodate the influx, the school established the Veterans Academic

Resource Center to help with everything from coordinating veteran's benefits to counseling.

The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan brought more veterans—and an interesting change to my classes.

No longer were classroom discussions about war limited to dry facts about dates and political decisions. The veterans could describe conditions that left other students stunned. One student described watching as his friend was killed in battle, and another veteran described being evacuated after being wounded.

And if I make a mistaken comment about the wars in Iraq or Afghanistan, I can count on a veteran pointing out my error. There is nothing like the phrase “I was there” to silence a dispute.

Instructors are used to hearing pleas from students to reschedule tests, and I thought I had heard every possible reason from weddings, to vacations, to job requirements. But I was surprised when a veteran justifiably asked to take a final examination a few days early because he was being deployed to Afghanistan, or when another student said he would have to miss class because he was undergoing rehabilitation at the VA hospital for a war wound.

Unfortunately in our society, veterans sometimes don't receive the services and respect they deserve, but UCF has encouraged and backed a wide range of projects to help veterans and keep their stories alive. The UCF Department of History is undertaking two ambitious projects to recognize some of their contributions. The Veterans Legacy Project so far has recorded more than 500 interviews with veterans of six wars to archive their stories, and in May the department and the National Cemetery Administration launched a project to research the lives of 120 little-known veterans buried at Florida National Cemetery in Bushnell. The project involves more than 200 students and faculty members.

I appreciate having veterans in my classes because they bring a large portion of real-world experience that many other students will never experience. They also tend to be older and more serious students, having made huge sacrifices to earn the veterans benefits to pay for their education, and eager to finish their studies to enter the work force.

Come this fall, the university will honor veterans with a series of programs ranging from a job fair to a kayaking trip. And on the school's sprawling Memory Mall hundreds of American flags will be placed, each representing a veteran attending UCF.

The special ceremonies will come in November, but it is appropriate to thank the UCF veterans for their service throughout the year.

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