



Student veterans find community, place to launch new careers at UMSL

By Steve Walentik

Veterans who gain the most attention in the United States typically fall into one of two categories.

There are the ones celebrated for the heroism they displayed while battling in war zones and the others who've returned broken from those same locales, battling conditions such as post-traumatic stress disorder and struggling to readjust to civilian life.

But most former soldiers, sailors, Marines and airmen exist unnoticed somewhere in the wide space between.

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"There's this whole group of stealth veterans," says Joshua Perschbacher, director of the Veterans Center at the University of Missouri–St. Louis.

"They probably sit in the same pew at church next to you. They're at the baseball games. And unless they are invited to stand up on 9/11 or Veterans Day, you might never know that person is a vet."

Currently, more than 400 student-veterans have found a home on the UMSL campus. They blend right into the rest of the student population as they work to earn their degrees and brighten their futures.

Here are a few of their stories.



PAUL
Nator
Former Green Beret,
civil engineering student

Paul Nator was attending Ranken Technical College and working construction jobs on the side back in 2010, but he couldn't escape this persistent feeling he could be doing something bigger.

He enlisted in the United States Army and eventually earned his way into special forces, spending five years as a Green Beret. He served five deployments, including two in Iraq and three in Southeast Asia.

Nator was first deployed to Iraq as Operation Iraqi Freedom gave way to Operation New Dawn, but he returned years later as fighting flared up again. His experiences overseas shaped him.

"You go through these hardships and successes with people that are like you and understand you to coming back here, and it's just not the same I guess," Nator says. "It wasn't easy to leave behind."

Nator knew he had to find something to challenge himself as he transitioned out of military service. He thought the UMSL/WUSTL Joint Undergraduate Engineering Program could do just that.

He still had a difficult time leaving behind the camaraderie of his unit.

"It's cliché, but we fight for one another," he says. "I spent two years in the infantry and five years in special forces, and even more so on a special forces team, you know every single one of their wives and kids. It's a big family."

After discharging in 2017, he remained wary of returning to school and uncertain how he'd fit in after so much time away.

"I know at first I was very standoffish in thinking I might be too old for this," Nator says. "The commuter population and the veteran population made it easier than I originally thought."

Nator hasn't only been working toward his degree in civil engineering. He's also been studying entrepreneurship and spent four months last year interning with startup Jrop through the Ameren Accelerator program.

Just being in that environment and interacting with other interns inspired Nator to explore launching his own business.

He's brought his military expertise to Green Hat Shooting Solutions, which opened last May and provides firearms training. He also took part in the inaugural Entrepreneur Quest Student Accelerator as he grows the venture.

"As a business, we're really getting a lot of momentum," Nator says, "and having conversations with different military units that want to hire us on as contractors."