

Military Salutes Homeschoolers

by Howard Richman

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If you have been following the news, you may remember that in October 1998 Congress was rushing to pass the new 1999 budget so that they could get home and campaign for re-election. Part of the budget, a Defense Authorization Bill (HR 3616) signed on October 17 by President Clinton, included a provision which ended the discrimination against homeschoolers by military recruiters. This provision was negotiated behind the scenes with a subcommittee in the Senate by the Home School Legal Defense Association (HSLDA) with the help of Senator Coverdell.

For the next five years military recruiters must give homeschool graduates the same preferential treatment (called Tier 1) that they currently give to accredited-high school graduates and those with a semester (15 credit hours) of college. No longer will homeschool graduates be placed in Tier 2 with those who have a GED, or in Tier 3 with those who dropped-out of high school. Each branch of the military must allow up to 1,250 home school diploma recipients to be considered under the Tier I status.

The one area of the law that is vague is the way that the military will determine if a student is indeed a homeschool graduate. A memo already sent out by the Army to its recruiters states:

A graduate of a homeschool must present a diploma and a transcript which indicates that they have met the graduation requirements set forth by the state or school district which has jurisdiction over these schools.

Clearly those in Pennsylvania with diplomas from home education organizations whose diplomas are recognized by the PA Department of Education (see page 28 for a listing) will qualify for preferential treatment. It is not yet clear whether those with parent-issued or correspondence-school-issued diplomas will also qualify, though it is the Home School Legal Defense Association's opinion that they will.

After five years, the military will re-evaluate. They will keep track of the attrition rate of the homeschooled recruits. If they tend to stay in the military as long as school graduates, homeschool graduates will get permanent Tier 1 status.

Already military recruiters are beginning to court homeschool graduates. For example, Staff Sergeant John Hancock of the Air Force Recruiting Service wrote the following in an invitation to homeschool graduates:

Those taught at home may also have a technological advantage over others. According to the Home School Legal Defense Association, computers are in 86 percent of home school households and children taught in the home spend less time watching television than their public school counterparts. In a computer-

based era, those are qualities the Air Force is looking for. For more information on Air Force opportunities, check out the service's World Wide Web home page at www.airforce.com or call the Air Force Opportunities Center toll free number, 1-800-423-USAF.

One of the first homeschool graduates who will benefit from the new law will be Christian Bertram (PHAA class of 1998) from Grantham. He enlisted in the Marine Corps during the summer, scored well on the Marine Corps admission test, but has been kept waiting and waiting for the Marines to make a final decision. This new law will put his enlistment on the fast track.

While homeschool graduates have been less likely than school graduates to be accepted by the military in the past, some have been accepted. There are currently PHAA graduates in many branches of the service and others who are currently preparing to be officers.

Brad Wetherbee - Navy

Several PA Homeschoolers Accreditation Agency (PHAA) graduates are already in the military. Brad Wetherbee of Dillsburg (PHAA class of '95) is currently a gunners mate striker in the Navy, sailing on the USS Detroit (a tanker that refuels other ships) toward the Persian Gulf.

His family, naturally, is following all of the news about the Middle East closely. "He has a lot of family and friends praying for him as he goes over there," his mother, Linda, told me. "There's not a lot that we can do except commit him to the Lord, because he really is in the Lord's hands at this point, and he knows that too."

Brad is in his fourth year in the Navy. He enlisted in the Navy in October, 1994, at the beginning of his senior year, but did not actually enter the Navy until the following September.

I remember when he was trying to enlist. For a little while it looked like the Navy was going to reject him just because he was homeschooled. His case went all the way up to the Educational Board of the Navy in Washington. Linda called me and I mailed the Navy further information about the PHAA diploma program showing them that the Department of Education and the Pennsylvania Higher Education Assistance Agency both found our diploma to be acceptable.

Meanwhile, Linda was trying to set up a meeting with the Education Board of the Navy, but was having trouble. Feeling discouraged she told them over the phone, "Well, maybe we should just get our lawyer to meet with you." Two hours later she got a call from the Educational Board of the Navy saying that they had made a decision to accept Brad's diploma.

On September 9, 1995, Brad left for Basic Training at Great Lakes IL. He has been trained as a gunner and can handle Navy guns, not only on his own ship, but on other ships and helicopters as well.

His ship is stationed just three hours from his home and so when he is in port Brad often comes home on leave. When he does he usually brings one or other of his Navy buddies with him (most of them don't have families nearby). While home, Brad loves to participate in the activities of the Dillsburg ambulance and fire company. When he is on cruises he has more time for course work. He took an English course during his first six month cruise.

Brad will finish up his four year enlistment at the end of August (1999) and is planning to leave the military at that time. He will have money coming from the military for his education when he leaves, and may continue to pursue his education, perhaps as an Emergency Medical Technician.

His mother told me that Brad has definitely become more responsible since joining the Navy. On the whole, she told me, the experience has given Brad more time to grow-up and learn to be responsible, resourceful, and independent. "Brad really wasn't college material at the time he graduated from high school," she told me. "So we had to think of an alternative. I really think that it was a good decision."

Larry Paladin Reservist

Larry Paladin of Pittsburgh (PHAA class of '96) always loved playing war games and planned to enlist in the military right after high school. His parents were not so sure that he should commit himself to six years of active duty and persuaded him to enlist in the reserves instead. Larry enlisted in the Army National Guard reserves on July 1, 1996, just after graduation.

Like many other homeschoolers, he was discriminated against by the recruiters. He was classified as Tier 2, which entitled him to fewer benefits than Tier 1. Only by agreeing to go into the infantry (the least popular of the services) was he given college scholarship money for attending Indiana University of Pennsylvania (IUP) at the same time that he served in the reserves.

His basic training was deferred until the summer between his freshman and sophomore years of college. He tells many stories about basic training â about sleeping on the floor to avoid rumpling his bunk, living in a ditch for a week, and crawling through mud on his back.

He is especially proud of an award that he received at basic training â the cord that his drill sergeant carried around all through basic training and awarded to the soldier who showed the most improvement. During Basic training, Larry took on challenges, persevered, and was able to succeed. It built his confidence and showed him that he could do things that seemed impossible at times. That drill sergeant's cord is one of his most treasured possessions.

While at college, he participated in ROTC (Reserve Officer Training Corps). If he had stayed in ROTC during his junior year, he would have had to make the commitment to go into the military as an officer for six years right after college. But Larry stopped attending ROTC before his junior year. He started thinking about having a family and becoming a teacher. Even though he enjoys the military, he is anxious to settle down after college as a teacher.

John Henry Niederhaus VMI

Several PHAA graduates are currently studying at college to be officers. John Henry Niederhaus (PHAA class of 1997) is currently a sophomore at Virginia Military Institute (VMI). About 40% of VMI graduates accept commissions in the military immediately after graduation.

John Henry has always been strong academically. For example his SAT's were quite high and he taught himself Advanced Placement courses while being homeschooled as a senior. In the fall after graduation, he began to attend VMI with a complete academic scholarship. He won his scholarship as an "Institute Scholar" after a series of interviews throughout his senior year of high school.

He has continued to do well at VMI with his double-major in physics and history. At the end of his freshman year he was first in his class academically, with an "A" average. He told his mother that homeschooling helped him, because he was used to setting his own schedule, and so developed very good study habits.

He has also been active in other activities at VMI. He plays trumpet in the VMI band, plays bugle daily for taps and wake-up calls, and is on the VMI cross country team.

John Henry even reports positive feelings about the process that all Freshmen go through at VMI. The VMI system is designed to give students challenges which require them to look for resources of character. He found the hazing to be challenging, but was able to continue and persevere.

After graduation, John Henry has considered applying for a commission in the Navy starting with their Nuclear Propulsion school. But he knows that if he goes into the Navy and gets married, he would not see his family for months at a time, and like many homeschoolers he values family life, so he is weighing his decisions carefully.

Homeschoolers and the Military

Now that our graduates will be readily admitted to the military, homeschoolers will probably look more carefully at the opportunities that are available. Some may find challenges that can help them grow in self-reliance and perseverance. Others may find scholarship money and benefits which make attending college more affordable. Some may find careers of service which fulfill a lifetime dream.