

Mason's ROTC Program Experiences Growth Path for Personal and Professional Growth

George Mason's Army ROTC Patriot Battalion is on the rise. From its humble beginnings in 1980 with little more than 20 students, the program now boasts nearly 150 cadets, and appears on track to continue to grow in size and recognition. The number of freshmen making the choice to pursue a commission as an Army officer grew nine-fold in the last five years; more than ever before. To top it off, Mason Cadet Bryan Vega was recognized as the premier ROTC Cadet in the nation this year.



Mason ROTC Color Guard at Washington Spirit Soccer Game

A quick scroll through Mason's Army Reserve Officers' Training Corps [Instagram](#) and [Facebook](#) accounts provides a visual of the wide range of Mason cadet activities – including the annual Senior Trip, physical training at the Eagle Bank Arena, the Patriot Battalion Military Ball, Commissioning Ceremonies, Field Training Exercises, and the Patriot Games. What it does not reveal is what cadets consistently agree are the overarching benefits of the ROTC experience -- the physical, psychological, and financial support provided through the Corps.

Explains Matthew Rigdon, a Military Science 3 (MS3) Junior, "My unit is a second family to me." The Stafford, Va. native says, "Some of the best memories you'll make in ROTC are in the field with other cadets making the most of a challenging time; where you're being stress-tested to see how you perform under pressure. My fellow cadets are friendly, encouraging, and determined to succeed even when put in tough situations, especially since the success of each cadet contributes to the overall success of the team."

For Cadet Christopher Roman, an MS2 Sophomore, college tuition assistance was paramount. Roman, who hails from Canton, Oh., says, "The financial aid is extremely helpful and was very important to me. Although my parents were going to pay for my degree, I felt a responsibility to help them. Through ROTC, I was able to take the burden of college debt away from me and my family."



Left to Right: Cadets Stella Crump, Denesia Ragbeer, Sahar Khalid-Schieber, Tia Massey and Haley Nugen pose during field training exercises.

Sahar Khalid-Schieber, an MS4 Senior, who comes to Mason from her hometown of London, England, echoes Roman's appreciation for financial support. The Army ROTC is the largest provider of post-secondary school scholarships in the United States and one of the nation's foremost leadership development programs.

Lieutenant Colonel Matthew M. Kuhn, an active-duty officer and department chair, leads Mason's ROTC effort. Explains Kuhn, "ROTC combines courses in military science with practical leadership training to prepare for success in college, as leaders in the Army, or in any profession of choice." In addition to the special events, the program involves classroom

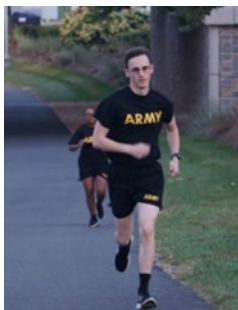
instruction, a weekly leadership lab, and early morning physical training activities. Kuhn adds, "The physical training activities, conducted three times a week, promote fitness, fun, and camaraderie."

The ROTC program at Mason was launched in 1982 as an extension of the Georgetown University Army ROTC, before splitting off independently in 2002. Today, the Mason Patriot Battalion hosts co-enrolled students from Marymount University, University of Mary Washington, and Northern Virginia Community College (NOVA).

Freshmen and sophomores can participate in the first two years of Army ROTC without committing to serve in the Army. Those students offered an ROTC scholarship then contract and incur a military obligation. There are also opportunities for juniors, seniors, and graduate students. Students must contract by their junior year or first year of graduate school to continue with the advanced course program, obligating them to serve four years of active duty in the Regular Army, or six to eight years in a unit of the Army National Guard or US Army Reserves, depending upon whether they received an ROTC scholarship. Officers may then continue to serve the remainder of their obligation in their current component or transfer into the Reserve Components or the Individual Ready Reserve.



Cadets Parkinson and White participating in physical fitness training



Bonniwell

About a quarter of the cadets arrive at Mason through NOVA, often through ADVANCE. It was that route that brought MS4 Raymond Bonniwell to campus. “I learned about ROTC while I was an ADVANCE student at NOVA,” says Bonniwell. He noted the advantage of the monthly stipend, the ability to get a security clearance, and the chance to serve his adopted country as key motivations for joining ROTC. Bonniwell, a dual major in Anthropology and Russian Studies, emigrated from Tzaneen, Limpopo Province, South Africa.

The success of Mason’s ROTC program was recently illustrated again as Cadet Bryan Vega was named to the top of the U.S. Army Cadet Command's national Order of Merit List (OML). The OML ranks all Army ROTC seniors across the nation, with the top 20 percent earning the designation of Distinguished Military Graduate. Cadets' OML standings are determined by a number of criteria, including grade point averages, strong athletic performance in the Army Physical Fitness Test, college athletic participation, performance during college ROTC training and Advanced Camp performance. Vega is completing his master’s degree in data Analysis Engineering with a concentration in Cyber Analytics.

Khalid-Schieber appreciates the diversity of her ROTC cohorts, “They can be best described as a diverse yet unified collective. We come from different backgrounds, cultures, and belief systems, but when we put on our uniforms, those differences seem to dissolve. We're bound by the shared experience of field training, academic pursuits, and community service, creating a sense of unity that transcends our individual identities.” She continues, “The commitment to discipline, leadership, and collective growth is evident in the way we interact, both in formal settings and in casual conversations. Despite the rigorous demands of the program, there's also an undercurrent of humor and camaraderie that makes the experience rewarding on a personal level.”

Khalid-Schieber explains that ROTC offered more than just discipline and a pathway to military service; it presented an opportunity to be part of an organization that goes beyond the individual. “Growing up in

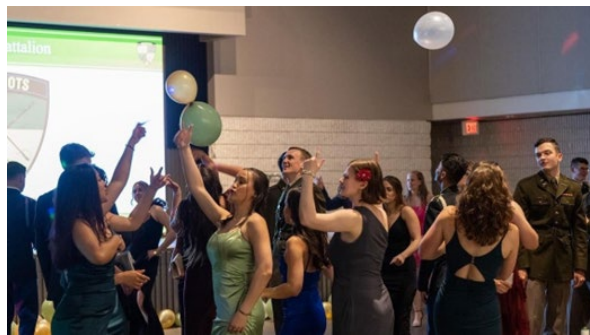
the era of social justice movements, climate awareness, and digital activism, my Gen Z upbringing conditioned me to be conscientious about the world at large. It's like I was coded to contribute, to give back to society, and to make a tangible difference," Khalid-Schieber explains. "ROTC is not just about me; it's about a collective sense of purpose, an interconnected web of responsibilities, and a shared mission. In ROTC, I found an environment where I could channel my innate desire to give back, to serve not just a cause, but a country, a community, and a set of ideals."

Roman also touts the professional support found through the program, "The experience that ROTC provides, especially for me, is perfect. My cohorts are motivated leaders that continuously strive to make each other better." Roman plans to pursue a career in law enforcement.

Rigdon, who studies Operations and Supply Chain Management, hopes to be an Active-Duty Quartermaster Officer after graduating and commissioning into the U.S. Army. Rigdon says, "I chose to work toward commissioning as an officer because I wanted to go to college and saw ROTC as an opportunity to be a leader in the world's greatest Army. With my plans of working in military logistics both during and after my Army career, my time with Mason ROTC is preparing me to be a better leader who will be ready to face the challenges that will come my way later in life."



Along the way, ROTC provides a variety of rich experiences, including the Military Ball and the Senior Trip. Says Rigdon, "My favorite memory in ROTC is from the Spring 2023 Field Training Exercise where I was fortunate enough to ride in a UH-60 Blackhawk helicopter down to Marine Corps Base Quantico. This experience was one of the coolest things I have ever done!"



Military Ball 2023

For more information on the program, contact Recruiting Operations Officer Frank Licameli at: arotc@gmu.edu and flicamel@gmu.edu, call 703-993-2706/2707, or by visiting the ROTC Office on the second floor of the Recreation Athletic Complex (RAC).