

An Unusual UMUC Commencement

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Many who work in Higher Education think commencement is the best day of the year, and I'm no different. I love the tradition and pageantry associated with this ceremony that has been around since the middle ages. Hearing the first chords of Pomp and Circumstance always gives me goosebumps, and one of the best parts of my job has been leading the procession of students into an auditorium where the energy is tangible. Luckily for me and my love of graduation we don't just have a commencement day at UMUC— we have an entire season! With locations around the world there are dozens of ceremonies in multiple countries that honor the inspiring accomplishments of our graduates every year. I've been fortunate enough to participate at graduation events in the United States, Japan, Korea, Germany, England, Bahrain, Italy and Turkey.

Each spring Adelphi Headquarters would give us a list of how many projected graduates we had at each of our UMUC locations, and in 2012 I think we were all a bit surprised to see several dozen graduates on the list for Kandahar, Afghanistan. It was sobering to realize we had deployed students who wouldn't be home to celebrate this milestone with their loved ones. At the time I was serving as the Director of Downrange Operations overseeing our functions in Afghanistan, the Middle East and Northern Africa. We had just opened our tenth location in Afghanistan and Dr. Allan Berg, Vice President of UMUC Europe, and I were heading downrange to do some site visits. My travel plans included stops at our sites in Kuwait and Qatar and then on to Afghanistan where I'd meet up with Dr. Berg at Kandahar Airfield. In late 2001, Kandahar was one of the first coalition bases established, but by 2012 it was known as the busiest one-runway airport in the world. The base population hovered at 20,000 and it was our largest operation in theater with three full-time field reps on site. Our May visit would provide us with the perfect opportunity to recognize the amazing accomplishments of our graduating warriors so in coordination with the base education office we put plans in motion to hold the first ever Kandahar recognition ceremony.

We had shipped a footlocker of caps and gowns from our Heidelberg location in March – hoping it would stay the course for those 3,000 miles and not end up in the black hole of military mail, and much to my relief it made it intact. Our field reps on the ground cajoled the dining hall staff into making a picnic lunch to be served after the ceremony, and they even found someone who could decorate a cake for the occasion. Staff in Heidelberg put together gift bags for our graduates with UMUC t-shirts, bumper stickers and stress balls (stress balls in a war zone, go figure) that I packed into my duffel bag along with a baggy full of balloons and a *Congratulations Graduate* banner. Also smooshed into my bag were two hoods. The Hawaii National Guard had a sizeable contingent deployed to Kandahar, and two of their soldiers were receiving their UMUC master's degrees. In an act of love and with immense pride their families managed to pull off a coup by getting two fresh (well, maybe semi-fresh is a more accurate description) leis to us for their graduates to wear with their regalia.

On the day of the ceremony we worked with some base volunteers to set up a makeshift stage on the boardwalk. The boardwalk was the center of off duty life in Kandahar. Essentially it was a giant dirt field

ringed with a dozen kiosks including the barber shop, a coffee stand, ATM machines, a cyber café and a hockey rink. Yes, a hockey rink in the middle of the desert. Off duty Canadian forces built the rink and while it didn't have ice, ball hockey games were the highlight of the night. The Stanley Cup even made an appearance one time along with a handful of NHL players who came to thank the troops.

The boardwalk had no cover so when the ceremony started we were sitting in the blistering hot sun. The base commander, Brigadier General French, gave the keynote address while sweat poured out from under our velvet caps like a faucet had been turned on. Dr. Berg handed out diplomas and shook hands with every soldier who crossed the stage wearing dusty combat boots beneath their cap and gown, M4 rifles slung across their backs, smiling from ear to ear.

After the ceremony, everyone was invited to the luncheon that was now set up in the middle of the courtyard. As people were congratulating the graduates and filling their paper plates with sandwiches, chicken wings, and potato salad, the unmistakable sound of an alarm shrilled through the compound. People dove into bunkers, graduates holding onto their mortarboards with one hand and their lunch tray with the other. My leg engaged several long seconds after I recognized the sound, and I was immensely grateful that the nearest sandbag encased shelter was only meters away.

Dr. Berg and I ended up in a bunker with about 15 others including General French and several members of her staff. Captain Patrick Hopple, a guardsman from Miami who sang the national anthem just 40 minutes earlier, was there. It turns out he sang in a cappella group that opened for my nephew's group six years ago in Boston. We took a picture together on my Blackberry, and he asked me to send him a copy. I met Staff Sergeant Dan Deiler in that bunker. Being from Wisconsin I had spotted someone riding around the base on a bike with a distinctive green and gold Packer themed helmet, and when I saw Sgt. Deiler in the bunker that helmet was resting at his feet. Turns out this fellow cheese head was from Janesville. I tried to follow the lead of the soldiers around me by engaging in small talk but clearly my level of expertise with rocket attacks fell far below that of those around me. Some guys had casually resumed eating their lunch like it was just another in a cafeteria. Mine was covered with a layer of bunker dirt, evidence of my not so graceful stumble into the shelter, but I wouldn't have been able to eat it anyway since my stomach was in knots. Every 90 seconds or so the chatter would be briefly drowned out by the sound of incoming rockets. This went on for about 10 minutes, then silence as we waited for either another attack or the all-clear siren. When the all-clear finally sounded, we grabbed our plates and caps and gowns and filed back out into the heat.

Dr. Berg and I made our way back to the Education Center to check on our staff, and within thirty minutes everything was back to normal, or as normal as anything ever really is in a combat zone. I will always consider it a blessing that I was in Kandahar on that May afternoon to bear witness to such a uniquely UMUC graduation. It was a graduation ceremony unlike any other, one where in the blink of an eye graduates turn back into soldiers, and guest speakers turn back into commanders. It was a ceremony where you don't just hear a speaker talk about heroes, but one where they surround you.