

WAR & THE CLASSROOM

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In the autumn of 1990, after Iraq had invaded Kuwait that August, the U.S. government sent more than 100,000 servicemembers to the Persian Gulf area for Operation Desert Shield—many of them troops stationed in Europe. A number of those troops were also enrolled in University of Maryland European Division courses during Terms I and II that year.

As large numbers of students left Europe on short notice for the Middle East, courses were disrupted throughout the university's European Division. Some classes were cancelled, because they suddenly had no students at all. In the middle of Term II, my telephone at Perlacher Forst American housing area, near McGraw Kaserne in Munich, Germany, began to ring with frantic phone calls from my Economics students (or their spouses, if the troops had already deployed), asking what they could do to keep from losing all the time and money they'd already invested in the course. I told them not to worry: They had more important matters to think about. They could simply take an incomplete in my course, without penalty, and finish it after they returned to Germany.

I had never given a student a take-home final exam before, but I made an exception for a very good student who'd already earned high A's on my first two exams and who was sent to Saudia Arabia shortly before the final test in Economics. I had doubts about his having the time or inclination to answer long essay questions on the exam while on duty in a war zone. So I assumed he'd complete the final sometime after his deployment in the Middle East was over.

I'd forgotten about him until almost the end of Term III, by which time Desert Shield had turned into full combat as Desert Storm. One day I received a thick envelope in the APO, with a return address I'd never seen before. When I opened the envelope, out came several sheets of Big Chief tablet paper, with neat handwriting on them, in pencil—along with a fair amount of sand. That student had also enclosed a handwritten letter, apologizing for not typing the answers to the final exam questions because he didn't have a typewriter, computer, or even electricity available in the area where he was stationed.

His determination to get an education while serving his country, even in a time of war, was a real example of "true grit," punctuated by the gritty desert sand that arrived with his final exam. And he got the A that he'd honestly earned in my course.

Dates and divisions of overseas service with UMUC:

European Division (1975-1978; 1981-1993)

Asian Division (1978-1979)

Munich Campus (1983-1992)

Augsburg Campus (1992-1993)

Russia Program (1993-1995)