Fly, Fight and Win: ROTC at UNH

Between extra classes, physical training and a leadership lab, the program may sound like a lot of work. However, several participants have cited it as one of the most formative experiences of their lives.

Stefanie Kistler, Staff Writer

On a corner of campus tucked away in the shadow of towering Rudman Hall, there is a tiny building called Zais Hall, home to the next generation of Air Force officers: the members of UNH’s Air Force ROTC.

ROTC stands for Reserve Officers Training Corps, an organization in hundreds of colleges across America that was officially established by the passage of The National Defense Act of 1916. After World War II, former President Dwight D. Eisenhower signed into effect General Order No.124, which established many specifically Air Force ROTC (AFROTC) detachments. This was when the original detachment, Det 4, HQ 1st AF, Air Defense Command, was born.

Reborn in 1952 as our modern AFROTC Detachment 475, this organization has had a presence on the UNH campus for the better part of a century. Most students probably remember seeing classmates in dress uniforms on Wednesdays (the only day uniform is required) or working out on Thompson Hall (T-Hall) Lawn in identical garb. But there is more to the program than uniforms and synchronicity.

Being in AFROTC in itself is a commitment. AFROTC is a commissioning source, one of the three ways to become an Air Force officer. The program intertwines with a regular college education, adding specific classes to prepare students for a career in the U.S. Air Force.

On top of the extra classes, there is also a leadership lab once a week, physical training (PT) twice a week (or three times if you qualify), field training (between sophomore and junior year) as well as a few special lectures sprinkled throughout the year. The normal route for an AFROTC cadet is to join freshman year so they have enough time to complete all courses, but there is some flexibility for those interested in joining later (but not too late).

There are also some students who drop out of the program within the first year before they officially have a contract with the Air Force. If students decide to stay on, they will be contracted officially as members of the Air Force, and often receive a scholarship.

Scholarships are one of the biggest benefits of the AFROTC program. As a part of AFROTC under scholarship (i.e. officially in), the Air Force pays for schooling in full, a benefit any college student knows is highly desirable. The only stipulation is the promise made to commission into the Air Force fully after college. If this promise is broken, or a student leaves the program before they graduate, that money will be owed back.
Megan Gallagher, a member for over four years now, said being part of the organization made her the person she is today. As a scholarship student involved in Junior ROTC in high school, Gallagher wasn't entirely aware of what saying yes to the Air Force meant at the time. She learned fast exactly what she signed up for.

“I think I was initially a little intimidated,” she said. “But I stayed because there was something empowering about what we were learning.”

Gallagher also described how being in the AFROTC has benefited her regular life more. She says she is much better at receiving and giving constructive criticism, her leadership skills have improved and her fitness level has grown.

Aside from the vast array of skills learned through the program, and the monetary benefits, the people in the program also make it great.

“The more I interacted with people in the Air Force, the more I realized it attracts really really cool and driven people, who all seem to think I could also be cool and driven,” she said. “You kind of have moments where you think ‘Can I do this?’ and you have people around you saying ‘Yes, you can.'”

Gallagher is set to graduate in December 2023 and will join the U.S. Air Force upon graduation. She said that having a guaranteed job after college is a comfort.

“You don't know exactly what job you will get, but there is a guaranteed stability after college that not many people get,” she said.

Before she graduates, Gallagher says there are still many events and programs to make it through. The Honor Guard performs at football games, they have multiple events this Veterans Day (including a 5K run), and Special Warfare Air Force week, where AFROTC cadets receive direct mentorship from Air Force members in Special Warfare.

“I am not the same person I was when I joined,” she said. “And I think that's a good thing.”