

Around the World and Back Again: One Veteran's Story

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Growing up, Kristina Johnson noticed that in her town, not many people left to see the world. But she wanted to.

That wanderlust didn't change after graduating Goffstown High School in 2005 and continuing her college career at [UNH Manchester](#). What did change, what turned her dream into a plan of action, was some advice from a professor in the summer of 2007.

"I was taking a business leadership development class at UNH Manchester with Professor Jack McCarthy. We had to make a life plan, part of mine was wanting to join the service so I could travel and he suggested enlisting, 'There's no better time than now,'" Johnson says. "(He) encouraged me through mentorship and long conversations. It was already in my mind, but I was apprehensive about making the decision... I enlisted in the [Air Force](#). I was in basic training three weeks later."

Johnson, who graduated from UNH's Manchester campus with a [business degree](#) in 2013, started fulfilling her mission of seeing the world almost right away. One of her first assignments was at Camp Bucca, Iraq. She arrived just as the U.S. military surge was ending, but it was her job to work security both inside and outside of the facility.

"On that first deployment I interacted with thousands of Iraqis," she says. "I learned in Iraq that people are just people. They aren't so different from us and not everyone is evil. I knew there was an inherent risk of dying or getting injured. I knew that people I knew were going to die or get injured, it was part of daily life. But I also knew that if that happened, I had years of experience and training. I was confident in my ability to handle it."

After another tour at Joint Base Balad, Iraq, Johnson re-enlisted and this time was deployed to Saudi Arabia. She was once again working security, which essentially entailed protecting assets, like information and weapons, keeping the base secure and law enforcement functions. But she also had the unique opportunity to train female soldiers for the Saudi Arabian Army.

"It was the first time women were allowed to serve," she says. "It had a huge impact on me. These were highly educated women, many of them were connection to royal families. But I learned a lot from them about their culture, and how 25 year old women are the same no matter the country they were born ...It's not something most people get to see or experience in their lifetime, it was really refreshing."

After separating from active duty Air Force in 2012, it was time for Johnson to come back home. Utilizing the Palace Front program, she immediately enlisted in the New Hampshire Air National Guard remaining a defender in the 157th Security Forces Squadron.

While she was in the service, Johnson had continued going to school, so she was only a few classes away from a degree. Since her pre-military career included UNH Manchester, she decided to finish up there.

Making the transition from the military to civilian life is difficult enough, so the idea of adding the sometimes-complicated process of going to college, transferring credits, dealing with financial aid and scheduling classes can be daunting. But Johnson says

she felt supported every step of the way at UNH's Manchester campus, particularly at the Registrar's Office.

"They were really knowledgeable," she says. "They were really good at keeping me up to date on what I needed to know regarding my Post 911 GI Bill."

She went on to say that as a Veteran, it was reassuring that the campus was close to the Veteran's Affairs Office, and that UNH officials have such a good working relationship with the facility.

Johnson also says the [career counselors at UNH's Manchester campus](#) were exceptional at helping her make the most efficient schedule that would get her the classes she needed, while also best utilizing the credits she already had. She says she felt that knowledge and ability is ultimately helping students get out into the workforce sooner.

"They know how the system works, they offer great advice and they help you to graduate as soon as possible," she says. "And I really liked that."

Johnson, now 27, lives in Goffstown, is still in the New Hampshire Air National Guard and is a business development supervisor at Advance Technology.

— *Melanie Plenda*

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