

Local grad mentors Afghan farmers

Written by Elizabeth Barrett
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Alex Peyton shares agronomy knowledge

PAKTIYA PROVINCE, Afghanistan—U.S. Army Sgt. Alex Peyton, an agricultural specialist from Gothenburg, bristles with weapons and gear as he sits quietly in a wooden chair, surveying the world outside the wire at Forward Operating Base Gardez.

Pulling guard duty is not one of his regular tasks in Afghanistan, but as a member of the Nebraska National Guard's Agribusiness Development Team (ADT), the agricultural section for the Paktiya Provincial Reconstruction Team, he must do his part to keep his fellow service members safe at the forward operating base.

While a student at Gothenburg High School, Peyton was more interested in becoming a veterinarian than a veteran.

"I've always loved animals and I worked for a local veterinarian during high school and pursued animal science during my first couple years in college," he said.

Grandfather starts spark

The 2008 GHS graduate credits his grandfather with first sparking his interest in serving in the military.



PEYTON

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“My dad would tell me stories about my grandfather when he served in the Big Red One during World War II,” he said.

Ever since Peyton joined the Nebraska National Guard in 2007, he has not looked back.

“It was one of the best decisions I ever made,” Peyton said. “I serve because when I wear the uniform it’s an honor that is hard to explain. It gives me a great feeling when I put it on.”

Peyton deployed to Iraq in 2010 to serve as an intelligence analyst. While he was in Iraq, he heard about the agricultural development teams the National Guard was deploying to Afghanistan to help infrastructure development.

When he returned to the States from Iraq, he was looking for summer work and considered agronomy, the study of farming. He worked for a friend from his church taking soil samples and identifying pests and found that he loved it.

“When I heard about this deployment, I thought it would be a great opportunity to get out in the field and do what I’m learning on the civilian side,” he said. “I’m here to help the people of Afghanistan become better farmers but at the same time learn about early farming practices.”

There is no specific military occupational specialty course designed to train agricultural specialists in the Army. Selection for being on an ADT is based upon experience in the civilian world, including education.

Agronomy helps selection

Peyton was selected because of his work with animals and his pursuit of a degree from University of Nebraska-Lincoln in agronomy.

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He believes that his experiences in Afghanistan will make him a better student and potential employee when he returns next year.

On a typical mission, Peyton will go out and talk to Afghan farmers to assess how the team can better help them improve the quality of their crops. The team also conducts quality assurance and quality control missions where members examine the farmers' produce to see if the training they have received has made an impact.

Sgt. 1st Class John Ruden, Peyton's first line leader, describes him as very capable.

"He has a lot of potential for more leadership roles and responsibilities," Ruden said. "He loves to engage with the local populace and teach them about agriculture. When there's a chance to go out, he's always eager to do the mission."

Ruden described Peyton's work ethic as really good.

"If I give him a task, he'll do it. He may ask me five different questions about how to do it, but that's because he wants to do it right, which is great," he said.

U.S. Army Lt. Col. William Prusia, the officer in charge of the ADT, describes Peyton as a motivated and dedicated soldier who makes a significant contribution to the team.

"Sgt. Peyton is a very sharp and knowledgeable young man," Prusia said. "He brings a unique skill set to the team that is invaluable. I don't know many guys in their twenties who have the knowledge and experience he has."

Plans to stay in guard

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When he arrives home, Peyton plans to finish his degree in agronomy and stay in the National Guard until he reaches at least the rank of master sergeant.

“I continue to serve because I have so many friends who got out early and regret it,” he said. “Overall, I’m really happy I joined and enjoy what I do here. I’d rather stay in than get out and look back with regret.”

Sgt. Christopher Bonebrake with the

115th Mobile Public Affairs Detachment