

Support Group Helps Soldier Earn Pilot License

By Edie Rosenthal
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TAMPA, Fla., Feb. 16, 2007 - *Army Warrant Officer 1 Derrick Rodriguez* is literally in the clouds after graduating from the OH-58D flight course at the Army's Aviation School at Fort Rucker, Ala., where he learned to fly the Kiowa Warrior helicopter. But being in the clouds is not what excites this 26-year-old.

"Flying 25 feet off the ground is the greatest adrenaline rush," said Rodriguez, who has dreamed of flying since he was a young boy.

Today he is flying the Army's Kiowa Warrior, a single engine, double-bladed armed reconnaissance helicopter and the first Army helicopter to have an all-glass cockpit.

Rodriguez graduated from Embry Riddle Aeronautical University with a degree in Aeronautical Science in 2005, with a scholarship grant provided by the Special Operations Warrior Foundation.

The Special Operations Warrior Foundation is a member of America Supports You, a Defense Department program highlighting the efforts of grassroots organizations in supporting the men and women of the armed forces.

"My parents always stressed the importance of a college education," Rodriguez said, "but everything fell apart when my father was killed."

Rodriguez was just 10 years old when his family got the tragic news that his father was killed, along with six other soldiers, when their medevac helicopter crashed in Iraq while deployed for Desert Storm. The 1991 death of Master Sgt. Eloy Rodriguez Jr., a Special Forces medic assigned to the Special Forces Command, rocked the entire family.

"Losing my father meant I had to grow up overnight and life had to be taken seriously," Rodriguez said. "But I also took everything my father taught me, and I worked hard to be the best at everything I did. I also knew that there were people in worse situations than me."

As the group has done for the past 26 years, the Special Operations Warrior Foundation put Rodriguez through college. The foundation provides college scholarship grants, not loans, to surviving children of special operations personnel killed in combat or training. The grants are provided cover tuition, books, fees and room and board.

Rodriguez planned become a commercial airline pilot and earn a degree from Embry Riddle Aeronautical University. While enrolled in college, he joined the Florida Army National Guard so he could fly. His unit responded to natural disasters and provided airport security.

As an Army specialist, Rodriguez was recalled for active duty and spent one year on the ground in Iraq outside of Balad. While deployed to Iraq, Rodriguez decided that a commercial airline was not where he was destined to be.

"I had a new challenge - Army helicopters," Rodriguez said. "I enjoyed being out there and getting dirty."

Although his military duties and deployments overseas or assisting stateside with hurricane relief may have caused a slight delay in the timeline for getting his bachelor's degree, he was always an honor student and on the dean's list.

Rodriguez, now a warrant officer in the Army, said he is preparing for new challenges that life brings, including the strong possibility of going on another deployment. Although he does not have any children, he said the foundation provides a great sense of comfort to those who do.

"Special operators put their lives in harm's way knowing, at least, that their children's education will be paid for," said Rodriguez.

Rodriguez also has his eye on the future. He said he hopes to get assigned to the Army's special aviation unit, the 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment.

"All of us at the Warrior Foundation are extremely proud of Derrick and his accomplishments," said John T. Carney Jr., the group's president. "If his sights are set on the 160th SOAR, then I have no doubt that is where his path will lead him. He is a wonderful young man, full of talent."

The Warrior Foundation has seen 111 of its students graduate college, and currently has 109 students enrolled in colleges and universities across the country. Another 500 children who have yet to reach college age are in the foundation's program. In 2006, the Warrior Foundation provided nearly \$1 million in scholarship grants and educational counseling to the children of military special operations personnel.

"Words cannot express my gratitude for all that the Warrior Foundation has done for me," Rodriguez said. "It is comforting to know that I will always be part of the Warrior Foundation family."

(Edie Rosenthal is the public relations director for the Special Operations Warrior Foundation)

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