

An Officer and a Physician

By Ensign Jonathan W. Brügger, USNR '08

With the global war on terrorism and U.S. and allied troops deployed in the Eastern Hemisphere, Americans are responding to the call to service, and this includes medical students.

I was commissioned as an ensign in the United States Navy shortly before starting medical school in 2004. In the Class of 2008, I am joined by three other Navy officers, as well as two Army and one Air Force officer. We are enrolled in what is collectively known as the Armed Forces Health Professions Scholarship Program (AFHPSP). This program requires us to complete an extensive application process, attend Officer "Boot Camp" that reinforces leadership qualities, continue to stay within military physical standards, and go on 45-day active duty orders every year. In return for our dedication, we receive full-tuition payment, reimbursement for all required materials including books and medical equipment, and receive a monthly stipend for living expenses. My commitment to the Navy for four years of medical school is four years of active duty service as a physician. As a full time student, it is comforting not to have to borrow large loans and know that upon graduation, there is a job waiting for me. However, I did not decide to serve my country for the career benefits, but rather, so that I may serve my country to my fullest capability.

Personally, my love for the military began as an undergraduate at the University of South Florida in Tampa, when I joined the Marine Corps Officer Candidate Course (similar to ROTC). I was required to attend a six week USMC Officer Candidate School in the summer of 2001. Though the training was intense, I loved the discipline and structure of the military. When I was to return to training in the summer of 2003, I was in the process of

applying to medical schools. Realizing that the Marines get their medical services from the Navy, I decided to withdraw from the USMC Officer program and take my chances at the application process to become a Navy physician in hopes of caring for Marines and Sailors. My gamble paid off and I am now living my dream of becoming a physician and serving my country.

People are often taken aback to learn that I am an ensign in the Navy and also going to medical school. Typically, when people discover that I am an officer, I am asked a slew of questions about my commitment and experiences. Usually they are surprised to know that I am both a first generation medical student and a first generation member of the U.S. Armed Forces. They wonder where my motivation came from. I simply explain that I grew up in scouting—earning my rank of Eagle—which gave me a sense of cheerful service without compensation and a duty to god and country. That spirit motivated me then, motivated me through the Marines, and continues to motivate me as I look forward to serving and giving back in every way possible.

Often questions follow about whether I'm concerned about being on the front lines and in combat. That was actually the first question my family asked when I told them I wanted to join the Navy.

Yes, it is true that some Navy physicians are in forward positions with the Marines and other armed forces. My response is simple. Those men and women are putting their lives on the line and it is



Third-year medical student Jonathan Brügger

my duty to be there to do everything in my power to make sure they get back home to their loved ones.

Perhaps the best encounters pertaining to my career choices come from patients. As a first year student, my Practice of Medicine (POM) small group had sessions in the Veteran's Administration Hospital (VA) and our teaching physician would take us around to visit real patients instead of just practicing on one another. One of those days was on Veteran's Day and my classmate, 2nd Lieutenant Andrew Bohn of the Air Force, and I proudly wore our

uniforms. The veterans were so pleased to see us and began telling us about their service time. One gentleman told us about how he helped in planning D-Day in WWII. His storytelling made it difficult to listen to his lungs, but I am confident that seeing us in uniform helped him more that day than any doctor could.

I always wear a Navy pin on my white coat to remind myself where I have been and where I am going. Often that pin becomes a conversation piece. I remember being on rounds with the chaplains for POM our first year. With the Chaplain, I visited a woman who was delighted to see us. As we began to chat, I noticed a folded flag in a case on her shelf and she noticed my pin. She told me about how her husband served a number of years and how pleased she was that he was able to have a military funeral. She was proud of his service and was very appreciative of mine. Such patient encounters remind me why

I devote my life to serving: to represent the fighting spirit of those who have gone before me.

My classmates are very supportive and are usually more curious about my rank of ensign than anything else. To clarify, ensign is the first Navy officer rank. It is the same as a second lieutenant in the Army, Air Force, or Marine Corps. When I graduate from Upstate, I will jump a rank and be promoted to the third officer rank: lieutenant. This is the same as a captain in the other services. And so follows the question of what I will do after I graduate. Do you sit on a ship in the middle of the ocean? Do you get deployed to Iraq? When and where is your residency?

After my time here at Upstate, I will have two choices. I could go directly into residency giving preference to Navy hospitals over civilian hospitals, or I can complete a year internship and then go on a General Medical Officer Tour (GMO Tour) where

I could potentially be deployed around the world. Currently, I am considering a surgical specialty and it is typical for Navy surgeons to go on a GMO Tour for a couple of years to gain experience on medical teams before starting residency. Flight surgery (learning to fly), underwater medicine (learning to dive), Fleet Marine Force (deployed with the Marines as a "Devil Doc"), or shore duty (working in a Navy hospital) are all options for a GMO Tour.

Residency is still a few years down the line. Right now, I am preparing myself for the clinical years here in Syracuse where hopefully I will spend some time at the VA. I feel very fortunate to be an officer in the Navy attending Upstate Medical University, and I look forward to the many experiences that the Navy has to offer me as a physician. I can not think of a better way to practice medicine, serve my country, and have the adventures of a lifetime!

Saying Goodbye

By Shiu-chung "Shoey" Au '09



I had a woman cry on me today.

You see, today was the Upstate Memorial Service for the loved ones of the people who donated their bodies to research. It's both a celebration of their generosity and an opportunity to honor those who gave us such priceless gifts—our cadavers.

As we left the service for the reception, I caught the eye of a couple I had greeted on the way in.

They asked if I was a student, where I was from, and what I was going to specialize in. All of that is rather standard stuff for me now. But the couple felt comfortable enough to elaborate about their loved one, who had passed away in February. He was their adopted son, whom they loved very much but who suffered from many congenital physical ailments. Their family picture showed a large teenage boy who, despite his condition, seemed full of mirth.

He died very suddenly, at the age of 21, in the hospital before his mother could see him one last time. The guilt overwhelmed her and she began to cry. I put my hand to her shoulder and she just reached out to be hugged.

All of a sudden, I was offering comfort to a woman I had never met before. It felt so strange to experience that aspect of human care—what I left engineering for—emerging so quickly in my medical education.

I tried to offer reassuring words. I told her that her son had known, even if he couldn't see her, that she was always there for him, that she was beside him in spirit. I told the family the love they showed their son was a wonderful display of human character.

The family thanked me, asked me to keep in touch and let them know what I do with my degree and training. They wanted to know that their son lived, that he loved and was loved, and that he did not die in vain. It's the least I can do to express my gratitude for the gift of their son's body.