

Transcript for Conversations @ KAFM CMUnow: July 2, 2020; Student Veterans

Katlin Birdsall: Remarkable accomplishments are happening every day on the Colorado Mesa University and Western Colorado Community College campuses. Including contributions from the more than 400 student veterans whose enrollment at the University continues to grow. Women and men who served in the Armed Forces are a significant part of CMU's campus culture. They are diverse in their service, as well as their academic interests, and have served in regions spanning the globe. In 2019, CMU student veterans initiated legislation on campus that was passed not only by U.S. Congress, but was signed into law by the President of the United States. Today, on this special pre-July 4th edition of CMUnow on KAFM Community Affairs, we will be joined by three student veterans. We would like to welcome our first two guests today, Jordan Lagree and Jeremy Lagree, both of who are Navy veterans. So welcome to the show, thank you so much for joining us today!

Jordan Lagree: Yeah, of course!

Jeremy Lagree: Yes, thanks for having us!

Katlin Birdsall: Yeah! So, I know it will be a little bit tricky because we do have the two of you calling in. So we're just going to kind of dive right in to the questions, and get started! So Jeremy, I think I'm going to start off with you today. So you were on a ship that carries more people and is bigger than many towns and small cities in America, which is pretty impressive. And I was hoping you could maybe describe for our KAFM listeners what that's like. And, you know, does it feel different than living in a town or a city, that's on water, or, you know, how does that compare?

Jeremy Lagree: Um, yeah, I mean, it's definitely interesting. It's a bit of a shocking experience, you know, when you kind of first see the size of that ship, you ask yourself how it's possible to stay above water. It is. I think any time we deployed, about Navy personnel, you'd have about eight or nine hundred, and then yeah, we'd pick up about three thousand Marines or so, right before we deployed. So, it was interesting. Some people, you know, you saw all the time, and some people, you could be there for three years and maybe see them once or twice. So, definitely just kind of dependent on the job you had, and where you were at in the ship. There's, yeah, it was pretty rare to run into some people, but, um, sometimes, yeah sometimes you see the same people every day too. So, it was definitely an interesting experience.

Katlin Birdsall: Yeah, and one that probably not a lot of people can relate to. But that's, it's interesting to hear that from your perspective.

David Ludlam: Yeah, when your only point of reference is movies like “Top Gun” [laughing], it’s hard to imagine a ship that size. But, Jordan, I understand that you served on a ship that was much, much smaller, and that that ship had a whole different culture because of its size. Can you kind of talk to us about where you served, and how that kind of differs from like a major aircraft carrier or something like that?

Jordan Lagree: Yeah, absolutely! So yeah, I was on a much, much smaller ship. Our total crew, I think the max is like 400, and that’s officers, crew, kind of all of the same. We serve all in the same places, really, as the bigger ships. But because it’s just so much smaller, unlike Jeremy’s experience, I saw the same people every single day. So I think the camaraderie base was much smaller. You know, we knew the officers. The Commanding Officer of the ship, you know, knew most of us by first and last name. You know, and even where we were from. So I think the dynamic is, you know, vastly different. We’ve compared stories a ton, him and I, about how they would, you know, run out of food or like, ketchup sometimes, and that wasn’t really, you know, the Navy experience that I was used to, because there was just so many fewer of us.

Katlin Birdsall: You know, and that’s interesting, again, that’s something that probably a lot of people wouldn’t even think about, is just the logistics of having pretty much a small city out on the sea.

David Ludlam: Yeah, literally a city.

Katlin Birdsall: Mmhmm.

Jordan Lagree: Yeah! [laughing]

David Ludlam: Well, Jeremy, I know when most people who haven’t served in the military hear about airstrikes, they see something on tv, or maybe the outcome of those. But I think I understand that just a day or two, maybe, into your deployment, you learned that you were going to be conducting airstrikes on Syria, was it? And I just wondered – is that right? And then two, if it is, how did that feel, like, what was that experience like and being part of that?

Jeremy Lagree: Yeah, um, it was definitely interesting. I had finished up A School, and they were sending me to a ship. And, you know, I’d just heard the name of it, I looked up some stuff on how big it was; you know, I was kind of trying to prepare myself. And, when I got out there, I

mean shortly into, within, you know I think it was the first week: I'm just getting introduced to how the ship works, I'm introduced to the crew that I'm going to be working with for the next four years. And then all of a sudden, they're talking about going into general quarters, and battle stations, and then before you knew it, you know, within a week of getting there, you hear the bells ringing, everybody is jumping out of, uh, everybody is jumping out of their racks and throwing their boots on, and red lights all over the ship, and everyone is scrambling. And I'm, kind of, just kind of lost in it for a little bit. And then, you kind of start to see how all these people know exactly what to do, they know their role, you know, in the big machine. They know what they have to do to make the machine go smoothly. And it was really interesting to see, you know, everybody starting to work together, do their part, to achieve a common goal. But for me, it was definitely an eye-opening experience. It was kind of nerve-racking at first, I was a little scared, I didn't really know what was going on. But they were pretty good at, you know, kind of taking me under their wings, and showing me the ropes, and yeah, luckily everything went as it was supposed to, and we got out of there okay, the mission was a success I'd say.

Katlin Birdsall: Yeah and that's probably too why, I mean, there is so much training that happens before. So, you know, I'm assuming this, I've never served in the military before, but I would assume that's why you go through so much training, so that way by the time you get to these, you know high-pressure, high-stake situations, you can at least fall back on your training, and then, like you said, rely on your teammates in the Navy to help you through, kind of, one of those first time experiences like that.

Jeremy Lagree: Yeah, yeah absolutely. And a big thing in the Navy, too, is they call them "Standard Operating Procedures"; the idea behind it is that somewhere, something is written down that tells you exactly what you're supposed to do and when you're supposed to do it. So very literal, and you're supposed to be able to do something word, for word, for word, for word, and there's lots of procedures that are in place for you to know what to do, and when to do it.

Katlin Birdsall: Alright! Well, you are listening to CMU now on KAFM Community Affairs and our first guests today are current students and Navy veterans, Jordan Lagree and Jeremy Lagree. So Jordan, I'm going to head it back over to you, and kind of head in a little bit of a different direction. So the ratio on a Navy ship of men to women might be about 4 to 1, you know, that's just kind of a guess-stimate. But I'm just curious, for you, what it was like to be in a gender minority, and how it impacted your experience?

Jordan Lagree: Yeah it is, uh, the ratio is definitely, definitely off. And I think that, you know, again, there are, well, assuming there are probably people out there, you know, that think that the military is just, you know, a male profession. And I, I guess a mindset, because that's, you know, how things used to be. I know, as a female veteran, of course, I think, you know, there's

value in the diversity of it all. But I never really had, you know, those experiences. I was in a shop with, you know, a bunch of guys, and there were a few of us girls, I think the most was 4, 4 out of 17, 18, at a time. And we worked together well. They were, you know, from all over the country, and treated me just, as part of the team. But I also went in with the mindset that, you know, there may have been people who thought that, you know, women don't belong in that place. And so I went in with, "I'm gonna bust my butt", you know, "I'm gonna get dirty, I'm gonna do whatever I have to do to prove myself, and be a vital part of the team", and that was really my experience. I can't really say that I ever was treated any different because I was female because I was willing to work just like the guys were, so...

David Ludlam: Well, when you were talking earlier, before started, before we went on air and started the podcast, I heard you talk about this term, "accelerated intimacy", which is an interesting term. I was wondering, can you expand a little bit on, what does that mean? And how did you come up with that term? Or what was your experience around this "accelerated intimacy"? I think it was referring to your fellow colleagues?

Jordan Lagree: Yeah absolutely! So, I think this is kind of something common that I, you know, most veterans could agree with. And I try to explain it to you know, my civilian friends, you know, we go on deployments for 9 or 10 months at a time, or, you know, even when we're not in deployment and we're in port on the ship, I mean, you work with the same people every single day. And, you know, through the good, the bad, the ugly. I mean, we go through the trauma of it all, and, being homesick and missing our families, and there's no, really, other outlet but to, kind of, talk to each other about it. You know, so I've had friendships, you know, 24, 25, years now, and I've known people the 8 years in that I sometimes have felt closer to, just because, you're in a confined space, very close quarters. You get to know, you know, the intimate details of that person's life, and it does, it kind of just accelerates it, and you get close, even if you don't want to sometimes. Just ... yeah.

Katlin Birdsall: That's great. Well, you are listening to CMUnow on KAFM Community Affairs and our first guests today are current students and Navy veterans, Jordan Lagree and Jeremy Lagree. So Jeremy, I'm going to bring it back over to you for a minute. So, you know, for those of us that haven't served in the military, um, I think, you know, we've got a certain image in our mind of what serving in the military is like, and what our military does. But, you know, recently we heard about the large Navy hospital that went into the New York Harbor, here with everything happening with COVID, to help hospital patients. And I know that when you were in deployment, your ship went off the coast of Brazil to do humanitarian work. And I'm just wondering, is that a part of the Navy's mission too, kind of this humanitarian side, that maybe a lot people don't always associate with our military?

Jeremy Lagree: Uh, yeah, yeah absolutely. I mean, you know, when you think of, I guess, the Navy, or any, really, any military branch, it seems like it's more of a combative thing, and all you're expecting is, you know, either, some sort of violence tied to that. And that's not all the military does, you know, they do do humanitarian stuff, which I think is important. But yeah, going to these places and getting to work with some of these people, I mean, you just get to see that people are people, all around the world, and sometimes, you know, people just need a little help. And it's nice to know that, I mean even for us, you know, it gets, it can get daunting knowing that you're deploying for a certain reason, you might have to do some things you don't agree with, but you signed up for. And it's always just really nice to be able to just kind of zoom out, and be able to go into a place like that to help somebody, and see how grateful they are for, you know, whatever you can offer them.

David Ludlam: Well and you use the word "daunting", and I can imagine that sometimes the length of time in which you're gone is also daunting; I think I read that sometimes deployments can last more than a year. And you had mentioned that there's this, kind of, maybe it's a ceremony, or an event maybe, called "Manning the Rails"? Can you paint a picture of what that ceremony is, and what the experience is like when you have the "Manning the Rails" ceremony and what that's like for sailors?

Jeremy Lagree: Yeah, so, whenever your ship gets the news that you're going to be heading home and someone is coming to relieve your area that you guys were required to operate in, they start working out the details, and essentially, when you're pulling back into port, about, I would say about an hour, an hour and a half before you're actually pulling into the pier of your home base, you do what's called "Manning the Rails". So for us, we had a bunch of Marines on board, and Navy personnel; a lot of other ships it's just Navy personnel, so that would be who all it is. But, you know, you get in your dress uniforms, and everybody, you line the ship, shoulder to shoulder. I mean, there's hundreds and hundreds of people on my boat, so the entire flight deck is just covered all the way around the edges, all the catwalks around the edges of the ship, any bay that's open that you can see through the skin of the ship, and it's just alternating sailors. You know, Marine, Navy, Marine, Navy ... and dressed in your finest, standing at parade rest, and then, playing songs over the intercom, and you come, you know, come into your port, and there's hundreds and hundreds of people on the port just, you know, cheering you on, waiting for you to get home, your friends and your family. And then, you know, some of the coolest parts you get to see is when you pull in, you know, all the new dads and the new moms who haven't gotten to see their kids yet, because they deployed, or, brothers and sisters, or grandparents, and you get to see all these guys walking off the pier and greeting, you know, their loved ones after being gone for 10 months. It just, it makes it, there's sometimes you feel like you're not doing a lot because it's just day to day operations, and seeing stuff like that, you know, the gratitude that these people have for each other for what they're doing, it just, it makes you feel like you're part of something bigger.

Katlin Birdsall: I can only imagine what that must feel like. I mean, again, for me, never serving in the military, but I watch a lot of those videos when, you know, soldiers come home, on social, and they always bring a tear to my eyes, so I couldn't imagine actually being there in the moment and feeling all of that emotion, and getting to see, like you said, your loved ones. Especially new parents, and, like, it's conjuring up just a really beautiful image in my mind right now.

David Ludlam: Yeah for me too.

Jeremy Lagree: Yeah, it's pretty incredible to see.

Katlin Birdsall: Great! Well, we're already getting to the end of our time with the two of you today. So, I think we'll kind of leave it on this last question, and this will be a question for both of you. Jordan, why don't we start with you today? So, I think, you know, the 4th of July is right around the corner, and, you know, here in America we celebrate our 4th of July very vehemently, um, but I think maybe sometimes, you know, people don't think about all that goes into, you know, what the 4th of July really is celebrating, and what it means. So, for you, as somebody who has served in the military, um, does the holiday mean anything different to you?

Jordan Lagree: Um, yeah! I mean, I would say that it does. I think that, you know, for Jeremy and I, we come from a huge military family. Grandpas, Great Grandpas, um, you know, Dad and everything, so I think the 4th of July, you know, for me it's more about the people who kind of got us here. You know, the freedoms and the things that I get to do every single day, be a college student, um, you know, kind of live life the way that I see fit; the 4th of July for me is really celebrating the people, you know, who fought for that right for me. And so, that's just kind of where I hold the 4th of July.

Katlin Birdsall: I love that. I love hearing that. And Jeremy, what about for you? As somebody who has served in our military and who's now back on U.S. soil, and here, and a student at CMU, what does the 4th of July mean to you?

Jeremy Lagree: Yeah, it's, uh, I think I would kind of have to agree with her, it's about the people. You know, you kind of, just, over the past, I mean I don't know, however many years, you know, men and women that have just kind of given their lives for the idea of what all of us are fighting for. And for me, it's kind of the same thing. I mean, those men and women kind of laid their lives down for us to be able to do the things we're doing today. And, that just

shouldn't go unappreciated. So for me, it's about honoring the people that have gotten us where we are today.

David Ludlam: I like how you said that, you know, people who have given their life for an idea.

Katlin Birdsall: Mmhmm.

David Ludlam: That's nice.

Katlin Birdsall: It's a pretty powerful way, I think, to end our show today. So, Jordan and Jeremy, thank you so much again for taking the time out of your day to join us, and talk to the KAFM listeners, we really appreciate it!

Jordan Lagree: Thank you guys for having us!

Jeremy Lagree: Thank you!

Katlin Birdsall: Alright, well, don't go anywhere, because after a short break, we'll be back with current student and Army veteran, Desiree Medrano.

SEGMENT BREAK

Katlin Birdsall: Welcome back to CMUnow, a monthly show where we talk about the remarkable work happening at Colorado Mesa University and Western Colorado Community College. This is a special edition, and we'd like to welcome our second guest, current student and Army veteran, Desiree Medrano. So Desiree, thank you so much for joining us today!

Desiree Medrano: Thank you!

Katlin Birdsall: Alright, well we're going to just going to hop right on in and start asking you a few questions. So, in the first segment of this show, we talked to a few fellow veterans who served in the Navy, but you served in the Army, so, you know, I don't know how many people today know much about our Armed Services, or what their knowledge base is, so I was

wondering if you could tell us the primary difference between the Navy and Army? And maybe why you chose the branch of the military service that you did?

Desiree Medrano: Yes, of course! So, the Army was founded in June 14th, in 1775. It's the oldest and biggest branch in the military service. And it offers so many opportunities. The Army's primary function is to protect and defend the country with ground troops, armories, artillery, helicopters, nuclear weapons, and medical services. So, the reason why I chose the Army, was because there's just so many opportunities that you could get into. I decided to go into the medical field, and I did medical logistics. And I know with the Navy, they have to maintain the peace and freedom of the United States' seas, and they can transport Marines into conflicted areas.

David Ludlam: Well speaking of, you know, being on the ground, I saw that you were deployed in South Korea. Is that right?

Desiree Medrano: Yeah! Yes, I was.

David Ludlam: And I think, you know, South Korea is one of the most celebrated democracies on Earth, but right outside of South Korea is one of the scariest places on Earth, the DMZ. When you were there, I mean, did you have any action with the DMZ? Were you near there? Did you have any chance to see it? If so, what was it like?

Desiree Medrano: So, um, what we have to do, while we're on station in Korea, we do these STX's, which are field training exercises, and one of the field training exercises that we did, we were able to tour the DMZ. And, a little bit about the DMZ, it's the Demilitarized Zone, so it's an area for agreements and treaties, to go back and forth with North Korea and South Korea. And one of the places there, it's called the Peace of House, I forgot the Korean term of it, but that's how the North Korean and the South Korean military personnel communicate between each other. So, it was really interesting to be able to go in, and I actually stepped foot on North Korea.

David Ludlam: Wow.

Katlin Birdsall: Which is really, I mean, there's very few Americans that, or very few people outside of Korea...

David Ludlam: Outside of Dennis Rodman, right? [laughing]

Katlin Birdsall: Yeah! [laughing] – that can say that. So that's pretty incredible to hear. You know, I always find it interesting, when we talk to different students from CMU, and hear their past experiences and past stories, it's just pretty incredible.

David Ludlam: Well is there a wall? Or is it a line? I mean, when you put your foot in North Korea, how did you know you were in North Korea?

Desiree Medrano: So, it's a little house, and back to, it's called the Peace of House, it's a blue building, and when you walk in there, there's a big table that sits about 12 people. And there's a white line of tape that goes right between, right in the middle of the room.

David Ludlam: A piece of tape separates the, a dictatorship and a democracy?

Desiree Medrano: Yes.

David Ludlam: Wow.

Katlin Birdsall: That's pretty incredible.

Desiree Medrano: So, on each side, they had a South Korean soldier, and a North Korean soldier, and in that room, it's the safe zone, you could walk anywhere in that room, touch anything, take pictures. Um, so it was a really cool experience, and you kind of get the adrenaline rush when you go across the North Korean border, and you're standing right next to a North Korean soldier. Um, I don't know, it's really hard to explain, it's just really fascinating!

Katlin Birdsall: Yeah, I can only imagine what that would feel like. But I'm glad you were able to share a little bit...

David Ludlam: Walk back... yeah.

Katlin Birdsall: Yeah! Yeah, definitely. Well good, well, you are listening to CMUnow on KAFM Community Affairs and our guest today is current student and Army veteran, Desiree Medrano. So when you were over in Korea in, I believe it was 2013, the Seoul Towers were attacked by two missiles, and you were there for it and experienced it. And, you know, I can only imagine how scary of a time that could be and how scary of an experience that could be, but I was hoping you could maybe tell us a little bit more about what that felt like and what that experience was like for you?

Desiree Medrano: Um, it was in 2015, and, um, it just happened so fast, you know? We were, I don't remember, I think I was at the chow hall eating, and um, we got a call from our Commander, telling us, for all of us to get our gear and run back to the company. So when we all ran back to the company, they were just explaining the situation and what was going on, and that North Korea was testing missiles, and one of the missiles hit Seoul. Luckily there weren't any casualties or anything, um, but it was, definitely and eye-opener that South Korea is not just about having fun and experiencing the culture and all that. We were actually there, you know, to protect the South Korean people, and to provide support, and that incident definitely made it feel real that we're here to protect and not just have fun.

Katlin Birdsall: That's, you know, I'm glad that you brought that up. So, did you get to have many experiences, you know, off of your base where you were working directly with South Koreans? Whether they were civilians, or any of their military service individuals?

Desiree Medrano: Yes, so, there is the KATUSA soldiers, which they're actually part of the Korean military, but they help support the U.S. They have to go through a lot of training and testing, and it takes years for them to even be considered a candidate to help support the U.S. So, it was really cool being able to build that relationship with those soldiers, just because they knew the area around more, and we got to learn their culture...

Katlin Birdsall: A little bit more?

Desiree Medrano: ...From a different perspective.

Katlin Birdsall: Yeah, I'm sure.

Desiree Medrano: Because they lived there.

Katlin Birdsall: Yeah, I was going to say, I'm sure that's an interesting part of serving in the military and getting to be overseas.

David Ludlam: Yeah for sure. And, you know, I want to go back a little to your experience in the DMZ, just so we can talk about what the 4th of July means to you, because this is a special edition to celebrate the 4th of July. When, you know, you set foot, as you described, one of the least free places on Earth, and you live in one of the freest places on Earth, and so, having served in the military, and having had that experience, what does the 4th of July mean to you, as a student veteran? And, you know, how do you feel about it?

Desiree Medrano: Um... It definitely makes me realize, you know, to not take anything for granted. Especially working with the KATUSA soldiers, and what they have to go through. All males, in Korea, they have to serve in the army. They don't have a choice. So to have that privilege to, you know, step up, and want to serve for your country, um... just makes you appreciate life and what we have a lot more.

Katlin Birdsall: I can, you know, again, it's one of those things where I can only imagine because I've never served in the military... But, I can guess that having those experiences does just give you such a different appreciation for being able to live here in America and what our experiences are compared to others throughout the world.

David Ludlam: And that, that contrast, you know, of North and South Korea, which is such a unique place where you really have that really clear, you know, distinction between the two things, must have been just so powerful.

Katlin Birdsall: Mmhmm. Well, you are – oh, sorry Desiree! Well you are –

Desiree Medrano: No, that's okay! [laughing]

Katlin Birdsall: [laughing] I'm just going to read this now real quick [laughing] Well, you are listening to CMU now on KAFM Community Affairs and our second guest today is current student and Army veteran, Desiree Medrano. So Desiree, we're already kind of getting to our end of our time with you, this segment, it always goes by pretty quickly, but I was hoping that you could maybe talk to us about, you know, we've got about 400 student veterans on CMU's campus. And I'm curious for you, what does it mean for you to be able to attend college after serving your country? And, to specifically, attend college at CMU, where I feel like we really do try to support all of our student veterans?

Desiree Medrano: Um... First of all, I was born and raised here in Grand Junction, so, growing up I was able to see CMU as Colorado Mesa college, or Mesa State College, and just to see how much it's grown, and how we have so much support, especially from the VA, it's just, it's a really welcoming experience. And, I'm glad that I was able to go through the military, and kind of grow up a little bit, and then... because I did do a year of college before joining, and actually going through the experience, and coming back to CMU, I just have a different perspective on, you know, getting my education, and having the support and the teams, and the resources and everything... It's just such a better experience now.

Katlin Birdsall: Yeah! And I'm glad to hear that, you know, you feel supported, and I think that you bring a lot, you know, to CMU's campus, as well as, hopefully, all of your experiences to the classrooms. And to be able to, when you're interacting with our other students and faculty members, bringing, you know, a really different perspective to campus, and we're happy that you chose CMU and that you're here!

David Ludlam: For sure!

Katlin Birdsall: Well Desiree, thank you so much again for taking the time out of your day to come chat with us and let our KAFM listeners hear a little bit about your story, so thank you!

Desiree Medrano: Yes! Thank you! Thank you for having me!

Katlin Birdsall: Well this was a special edition of CMUnow on KAFM, and you can listen to a podcast of today's show at KAFMRadio.org. I'm your host Katlin Birdsall, along with my co-host David Ludlam, and we will be back on July 14th for our regular CMUnow show on the KAFM's Community Affairs Hour.

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