A MILITARY CAREER
Primarily Marked by War and Scholarship
By Ellen N. Woods

After multiple combat deployments, an Army officer comes to Catholic University for a master’s degree that combines foreign policy with religious studies.

In the decade that Army Maj. Joseph Evans served as an infantry officer with the 10th Mountain Division at Fort Drum, N.Y., he was deployed four times. He served in a peacekeeping mission in Kosovo followed by three combat deployments: one in Iraq, then two in Afghanistan.

His last tour of duty in Afghanistan was in the Nuristan province, where for 18 months in 2006 and 2007 he was the commander in charge of a valley that was about 20 miles long. “Our mission was to secure the area, make sure there were no bombs planted on roads, support the local government and police, develop the villages so they were safe for NGOs. We didn’t live on a base. We were right there in the valley,” explains Evans.

And he was in harm’s way every day. “My best friend was killed in front of me when his vehicle ran over an IED [improvised explosive device].” I was in letters to his wife and I knew instantly we had lost him.” As an infantry commander in charge of 200 soldiers, Evans says it was his job to support his troops after the loss of their comrade. “That helped me deal with it — or maybe not deal with it. The hardest part was coming home and talking to his wife and sons.”

That last deployment, scheduled for one year, should have had Evans home in time to be married on Memorial Day weekend of 2007. But when the mission was extended for six months, his bride-to-be scrambled to reschedule their wedding. Evans did return home in time for a Labor Day wedding, and soon after began the next phase of his military career as a South Asia regional specialist.

To become a foreign area officer, Evans had to live in the region for a year, learn the language, and attend graduate school. His first year exploring South Asia, while based in Pakistan, he says, has been the highlight of his military career. “I attended the Pakistan Army Command and Staff College and traveled all over the region. It was an incredible experience.” He became fluent in Urdu and Hindi and attained his second master’s degree in the art and science of warfare while in Pakistan (as a young infantry officer, he earned a master’s degree in aerospace engineering).

When he returned to the United States, he was stationed at the Pentagon with the Joint Chiefs of Staff working on the Pakistani desk. “I still had a directive to continue graduate work, specifically in my area of South Asia relations. But I was traveling back and forth to Pakistan so much that it took me a while to get that started,” says Evans.

A year ago, he chose Catholic University for that degree. “My experience in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan has left me with the opinion that the U.S. military underestimates the importance of culture as part of the world. I wanted to incorporate theology into my program. My degree will officially be in world politics, but I’ve been able to study with the School of Theology and Religious Studies and the sociology and anthropology departments, taking courses such as Religion and Terrorism and Modern World.”

“It’s been great — the politics department has allowed me the flexibility to pick and choose my courses and shape the focus of my research papers, in effect custom designing my degree.”

After completing his coursework and receiving his degree this summer, Evans is headed to Nepal next, where he will be a chief of security cooperation in Kathmandu. Evans became the first person in his family to attend college, thanks to the ROTC program at Lehgh University. When he graduated in May 1999, he was commissioned a second lieutenant.

Evans was serving in Kosovo in Southeastern Europe on 9/11. “We knew things were going to change. We knew there was going to be a war, but none of us could have imagined it would go on for so long,” he says.

Despite these long combat missions, Evans says he feels he’s lived a “blessed, fortunate, and grateful.” He has lots of friends who have come home with lasting disabilities and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. “I have the occasional bad dream. But for the most part, I’m doing OK. War affects everyone in a different way. I went to a wedding a few months ago and there were about 20 of us who had been on those last three deployments and seven years later every one of us has had a different experience. Some are sucking down a bottle every night and can’t hold a job and others are keeping it together.”

“My life is pretty good every day. There’s not much that bothers me. I don’t mind waiting in lines, sitting in traffic, having too much work. Sometimes I see people stressing over little things and I want to shake them and say, ‘You don’t have anybody shooting at you, nobody is about to die.’ Of course I don’t do that because they would think I’m crazy,” says Evans.

Instead, he has found a productive way to express his gratitude. He likes to help out wherever he can. He helps with training young cadets through the Georgetown University ROTC program (the program through which CUA ROTC students train). At 37, he enjoys the role of mentor to young soldiers. He worked with a few other veterans at CUA to get the Cardinal Veterans Organization (CVO) off the ground as an official student organization. (There had been an informal group for student veterans previously.)

“There are a lot of veterans at CUA. Young guys who enlisted right out of high school, served in dangerous missions, and now are coming back to college with their GI benefits. It’s not an easy transition. They need a group where others understand what they’ve been through,” says Evans.

He’s also found a family that needs his assistance. For the last few months he has been there to help the Zaki family, complete with five children, ease their transition from Afghanistan to the United States.

The family’s father, Ahmad, was Evans’s interpreter for the duration of his last deployment to Afghanistan. “He kept me alive, literally every day. When you are living among the locals, you need someone you can trust, who knows the culture and the language,” says Evans.

Zaki was by Evans’s side on patrols and missions, alerting him to danger, helping him build relationships with the locals and village elders. The pay was good for Afghan interpreters, but the job came with risks of retaliation from the Taliban.

Not long after Evans left, Zaki applied for a Special Immigraiton Visas, a program that allows Afghans who have worked for the United States to take refuge in America if their lives are being threatened. Evans wrote letters of support for Zaki. It took Zaki nearly seven years for approval, but with the help of the State Department and Catholic Charities Migration and Refugee Services, the family of seven arrived in the United States in February. Evans was waiting for them at the airport. The family has settled in Woodbridge, Va., just a mile from Evans, who has served as their unofficial sponsor.

“Sometimes my kids wait at the window for Major Joe to come. We don’t know many people yet, and he makes everybody so happy,” says Zaki.

Spending time with Zaki reminds Evans of his service in Afghanistan. “I think we made a difference,” he says. “Was it lasting? I’m not sure. But we gave it all we had.”

Thinking back on that last deployment, Evans says, “I was only able to go to Mass three times. Once the first week, once the last week, and one time in between. So that was 17½ months that I only went to Mass one time. Now I’m here on this college campus, I can go to church any time. I’m pretty lucky.”