Master Sergeant Michael E. Poggi
University of North Carolina Wilmington

SPOTLIGHT ON SUCCESS:

While stationed at Camp Lejeune, Master Sergeant Michael E. Poggi, of Milton, Mass., is working toward a degree from the University of North Carolina Wilmington. He expects to graduate with a master’s degree in Conflict Management and Resolution in 2017.

Balancing a career as a Marine with a full course-load of graduate work is no easy task, but Poggi was able to take a moment to answer a few questions about how he makes it work.

Q: Let’s start at the beginning. Tell us a bit about your military career.

A: I enlisted in 1996, and have been stationed in California and North Carolina. I’ve been deployed all over the world and traveled the United States extensively. I’ve done several deployments including four combat tours, one tour in Iraq and three in Afghanistan. My most memorable deployments by far were to the Arctic Circle in Norway, and to South America.

What made you decide to pursue a degree?

I had some college prior to enlisting and I completed my bachelor’s degree on active duty in 2010.

A few years later, I began to realize that I wanted to continue to broaden my exposure to the civilian sector, and prepare myself as a better leader in the process.

How did you come to settle on the University of North Carolina Wilmington?

UNCW is a phenomenal institution, and we interact with them quite a bit, being that they are so close to Camp Lejeune (Wilmington is only 30 miles away) and have an extension here on base. I met the program director in passing during a training event, and she pointed me to UNCW Graduate School. Once I read about the program details, I was hooked.

How does the UNCW extension site play into your coursework?

My program is actually a hybrid, where the first few sessions are on the main campus in Wilmington and the remainder is online, so I haven’t used the extension campus other than for support during registration, although I understand that other students in my program do use it more frequently.

My particular program is configured for those with full-time jobs in mind. I have been able to complete my studies thus far regardless of where my military travels take me. UNCW has amazing tech solutions such as mediasite and WEBEX, which allow students to videoconference into their classes and interact with the class. I’ve done that on several occasions from home, hotel rooms, and even my car.

Were you nervous about pursuing higher education?

I was. My bachelor’s took four years on active duty— and that was with 60 transfer credits— because I deployed and traveled significantly. I was worried the same would happen with the graduate program and slow me down or prevent me from completing it. Also, the workload for a graduate course is more in-depth. We are expected to develop our hypothesis and conduct research on our own, which requires loads of reading, writing and analysis. We compile multiple research papers per class, and I try to do two classes per semester. When it adds up, it becomes a significant amount of work.

It was certainly a shock at first, but I really enjoy the topics covered so far, and I have fun doing some great research on them. I suppose that motivation is what keeps me going.

How do you balance your schoolwork with your day-to-day life as a Marine?

It’s hard. The military does not stop for one person and, as an E-8, I have a great amount of responsibility. I knew I would have to juggle my career, school, and my family to keep up. I’ve spent many weekends crouched over the computer or perusing libraries to make good use of my time. Time management and self-discipline are paramount.

Have you discovered any valuable education-related resources or organizations for servicemembers?

Throughout the course of the program, I’ve met a lot of folks involved with various academic groups, clubs, etc. There’s a veteran’s lounge at the main UNCW campus in Wilmington as well that connects former and current servicemembers. This network has been very beneficial to me, being able to see what’s out there beyond the military and understand it, and also have new contacts beyond the uniform.

You’re working toward a master’s in Conflict Management and Resolution. How do you hope to use your degree to further your career?

I think Conflict Management and Resolution are key to being a leader in any industry, because fundamentally it’s about understanding human behavior. I’ve learned a great deal about conflict theory, psychology, negotiations, and organizational behavior in the process. It has taught me how to be a critical thinker, and I’ve become more understanding of people and processes, which makes me a more effective organizational leader. This program has had a great impact on my career and my ability to perform at a high level.

Is there anything you wish someone had told you about attending graduate school or about student life before you started?

I think Marines in general believe they can’t balance their job and college, and are afraid to try. This is especially true in the Combat Arms occupations. It took me 10 years of service before I decided to do it. So I would say that if I wish I had some good advice on it earlier in my career.

What advice do you have for Marines who are considering college or graduate school?

Well, two things. First, you’re a fool if you don’t. The military pays the tuition, and provides you with resources such as the education centers to make it happen. If you don’t take advantage of it before you leave the military, whether you retire or transition earlier, than you are wasting an amazing opportunity.

The second piece of advice I have is to keep the end in mind. Never let go of your vision of future success. That vision will carry you through the dark days where work, school, and family seem to overwhelm you, and doubt creeps in. Keep the end state in mind, and push the fight. It takes great determination to be a Marine and student simultaneously, and it displays strong character. When it’s all said and done, you can hold your head high knowing you accomplished something very special.

Since 1995, the University of North Carolina Wilmington Onslow Extension Site has offered flexible options to assist military-affiliated students in their pursuit of higher education. Dedicated to learning through the integration of teaching and mentoring with research and service, UNCW is consistently recognized at a national level for academic excellence and affordability.