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Two Georgia Southern University ROTC Cadets Join a Select Few on International CULP Mission

September 28, 2012

Two Georgia Southern University ROTC Cadets were selected as part of only 20 USA Cadets to earn their Spanish Jump Wings over the summer.

Cadet Travis Alexander, a native of Lawrenceville, Ga., and Cadet Shawnan Townsend, a native of Columbus, Ga.,— both rising Juniors and good friends— learned about the rare opportunity over Christmas break just a few days before returning to Statesboro to begin spring semester.

“I was getting ready for work and noticed I’d missed a call and a text message from Shawnan. I called him and he told me I needed to get in touch with Sgt. Linn immediately...and I did,” says Alexander.

Sgt. 1st Class Eric Linn informed the cadets of the mission—to teach conversational English to Spanish soldiers in Spain through the US Army’s Cultural Understanding and Language Proficiency Program (CULP), while experiencing the once-in-a-lifetime chance to earn their foreign jump wings.

CULP slots are awarded on a competitive basis and take into account several factors, such as GPA, physical fitness, an essay, and other pertinent selection criteria.

Proudly displayed on Cadet Townsend and Cadet Alexander’s Army Combat Uniform, they each had previously earned their Parachutist Badges. The badge is awarded to all military personnel of any service who complete the US Army Basic Airborne Course at Fort Benning, Ga. The three-week course signifies that the soldier is a trained military Parachutist, and is qualified to participate in airborne operations.

For the Cadets, this trip was part of a historical mission because U.S. Army Cadets had never been to Spain to train with the Spanish army—until now. Also, Cadets had never jumped with a foreign military. The Spanish Airborne base known as BRIPAK — La Brigada Paracaidist — is located near Madrid, and the classes the Cadets helped teach were located on the base.

During their airborne flight, a combination of 32 English and Spanish soldiers jumped out of a Casa C-212 Aviocar aircraft approximately 1300 feet from the ground, moving at 135 knots (about 150 mph).

“The Spanish plane was a lot shakier than I’m used to, so by the time the command was given, I was ready to get out of the plane,” says Townsend.

When asked to describe their emotions with one minute to go before jumping, the Cadets say they activate (what the military refers to as) *muscle memory*.

“In the back of your mind, you’re always thinking ‘don’t get hurt’ but when the lights go on, I block everything out. You just look at the guys in front of you and walk. Don’t think about it,” says Townsend.

“When you hook up to the static line, there’s no going back. At the one minute mark, that’s when your game face is on,” says Alexander.

The cadets say all the stress seems to disappear the moment you’re in the air. You feel the opening shock of your parachute, check to make sure everything is good and then you can relax.

“There’s a nice, cool breeze. You’ve got your canopy over you, you’re shaded. It’s like sitting in a hammock,” says Alexander.

“Everything is so loud when you’re in the plane, and the moment you jump out, there’s silence. It’s peaceful,” says Townsend.

The other 18 American cadets represented were from Universities all over the United States including West Point United States Military Academy, Virginia Military Institute, The University of Alabama, Texas Tech University and Pennsylvania State University to name a few. Townsend and Alexander each considered the opportunity to represent Georgia Southern University an honor and a responsibility.

Only one other school—Penn State—along with Georgia Southern sent two cadets to represent their school.

Townsend says, “There were 20 slots in the whole nation and for two to come out of Georgia Southern, it was definitely a point of pride.”

Alexander, a Construction Management major, and Townsend, a History major, plan to graduate in May 2014. In the meantime, the cadets will prepare for other leader development courses and possibly Air Assault School. They are both looking forward to getting real-life experience at Cadet Troop Leadership Training before they graduate.

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