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Local Teacher and Alum to Deploy with Air National Guard

December 18, 2017

While students and teachers head home Friday for a long break, one teacher's holiday travel plans are quite different. Brent Whitaker, Southeast Bulloch High School's choral director and a Georgia Southern University alum is being deployed overseas for the next five months. A Senior Master Sergeant in the Air National Guard (ANG), Whitaker is the band manager for Band of the South, one of the ANG's five elite national concert bands.

"I was scared to tell my students that I wouldn't be here next semester, said Whitaker, who is also chairman of the school's Fine Arts Department. "I waited until the last minute to tell them just in case my orders changed."

With about 40 members, the Band of the South and its five smaller ensembles are stationed out of the McGhee Tyson ANG Base near Knoxville, TN. Its musical ambassador missions are usually in the southeast, but the unit has smaller deployment teams.

"We have a dual mission that includes being deployed anywhere in the world where there are troops with any branch of service. We give troops a feeling of home." Whitaker is also the lead singer of Space A, one of the unit's ensembles that primarily plays rock 'n roll.

His troop will travel to at least 12 countries during the deployment, and they are all trained to be combat ready. Military operational security protocols prevent him from discussing where he will be sent, but he will have limited contact with his family, and his last deployment took him to Qatar.

"It's heartbreaking, but we're going to get through it," said Niven Griffin, a senior at SEBHS, who sings alto. "We love Mr. Whitaker, and we're praying for the best."

A gifted teacher, Whitaker started SEBHS's chorus from scratch 11 years ago with 20 students. It is now a nationally acclaimed choral program that has performed at Carnegie Hall, Disney World, the Governor's Mansion and received accolades from the Georgia Music Educators Association as one of the premier programs in the state. More than 150 vocalists now perform and compete in its five groups: Advanced Chorus, Women's Choir, Concert Choir, and the Literary Girls Trio and Boys Quartet. Their combined accomplishments and the level of difficulty of the arrangements they sing are astounding.

"All my siblings have been in Mr. Whitaker's choral program," said Teddy Smith, a junior who sings bass. "They all loved it. He teaches us how to be better workers and be independent. All my siblings came out of the program with a stronger work ethic."

Whitaker's students have always known that they share him with his musical military calling. He's served in the reserves for more than 20 years, so planning choral competitions and performances around his ANG schedule is common place.

"I'm usually gone two weeks in the summer, one week during the year, and two weekends per month, but it's been seven years since I've been deployed."

This semester Whitaker was emailing his principal one minute and fielding calls from the Pentagon the next while he planned a deployment alongside preparing for this past week's annual standing-room-only Winter Chorus Concert series, posting grades, and pre-planning lessons and experiences for the substitute who will lead his classes.

"I want the kids to have great experiences while I'm gone and to keep moving forward." He's entrusted his students to familiar, capable hands. Maggie Ally, Whitaker's first student teacher, will be his substitute. Ally is right next door at Southeast Bulloch Middle School where she has led the choral program for three years. She will alternate her time between the two schools during Whitaker's absence.

"It is heartbreaking to see him go, but I also think it's an incredible opportunity for us (students) to show him how his teaching has influenced us," said Katie Pedersen, a senior first soprano. "When he comes back, we can show him all the work we've put in and how self-sufficient we can be."

Whitaker hopes to return home in May before the students perform their year-end concert. "Even if I won't be directing them, I'd like to be able to see them. I told the kids that this was their time to see what they can do with me out of the equation."

When he does return, he plans to retire from the military with 25 years of service.

Born in Honolulu and raised in North Dakota, Whitaker is the son of a Navy veteran, so military service has

always been in his blood.

“I had my parents sign a waiver so I could join the Army when I was 17,” Whitaker said. “I was a combat engineer in the Army and spent a short time in the United States Army Band.”

After active service, he returned to college. He obtained a bachelor’s degree in music education and a master’s degree in music technology from Georgia Southern. Since 2001, he’s been a tremendous asset to Bulloch County Schools. His faculty peers selected him as the 2012 SEBHS Teacher of the Year, but due to his military service, he humbly removed his name from consideration to advance to the district and state levels of the competition due to schedule conflicts with his military commitments.

“SEB and the school system have bent over backwards for me,” Whitaker said. “The administrators have gone above and beyond to make this deployment easier for me and to show their appreciation for my military service in ways they would not have to by law.”

Stephen Hoyle, SEBHS’s principal said, “I see firsthand what an inspiration and role model he is for students. He has even helped our feeder middle school and three elementary schools in their music programs. The dedication he shows to our school and community is evident as well as his dedication to our state and country.”

Bulloch County Schools supports its employees who serve in the reserves. The Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve (ESGR) honored former SEBHS Principal Donna Clifton, who retired in May, with the prestigious national Seven Seals Award and Patriots Award, which are given to individual supervisors who support citizen warriors through a wide-range of measures.

Whitaker and his wife of 23 years, Tonya, have three children. During last week’s concerts he surprised his wife by dedicating one of the chorus’ selections to her, “Homeward Bound,” by Marta Keen. A line from the song says, “Set me free to find my calling, and I’ll return to you somehow.” The school system asks the community to help us thank Mr. Whitaker for following his calling and to pray for his safe return.

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Approximately 1,600 Degrees Conferred During Georgia Southern's Annual Fall Commencement

December 18, 2017



Rain couldn't dampen the spirits of nearly 1,600 graduates at Georgia Southern University as graduate and undergraduate students were recognized during the Fall 2017 Commencement ceremony today.

Held in Hanner Fieldhouse, graduates from the University's eight colleges received their degrees in three different ceremonies before family and friends. Georgia Southern alumnus and 2017 College Football Hall of Fame inductee Adrian Peterson ('01) spoke to graduates in the 2 p.m. ceremony. "As we walk across this stage, take everything that you learned here, take it," Peterson said. "You may not need it tomorrow, and you may not need it next week. But somewhere down the line, you're going to need it. More importantly if you don't need it, you're going to come across somebody in your life who will need it. We are Georgia Southern, so aim and strive for the best."

He also encouraged graduates to dream big, set goals, and leave a positive impact on those around them, especially younger generations.

"Go back to your communities, and help the young kids, because those are the ones who need it the most," he said. "Some of those will not be fortunate enough to have a mom, a dad, an uncle an aunt, a grandparent or older brother who will motivate and inspire them to set goals to dream big — so share the wealth."

Georgia Southern's President Jaimie Hebert, Ph.D., congratulated the graduates for their accomplishments and hard work.

"Congratulations, fall graduates," said Hebert. "Today is your day, and I am so proud of you. Enjoy this moment with family and friends, and know that you make the Eagle Nation very proud."

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